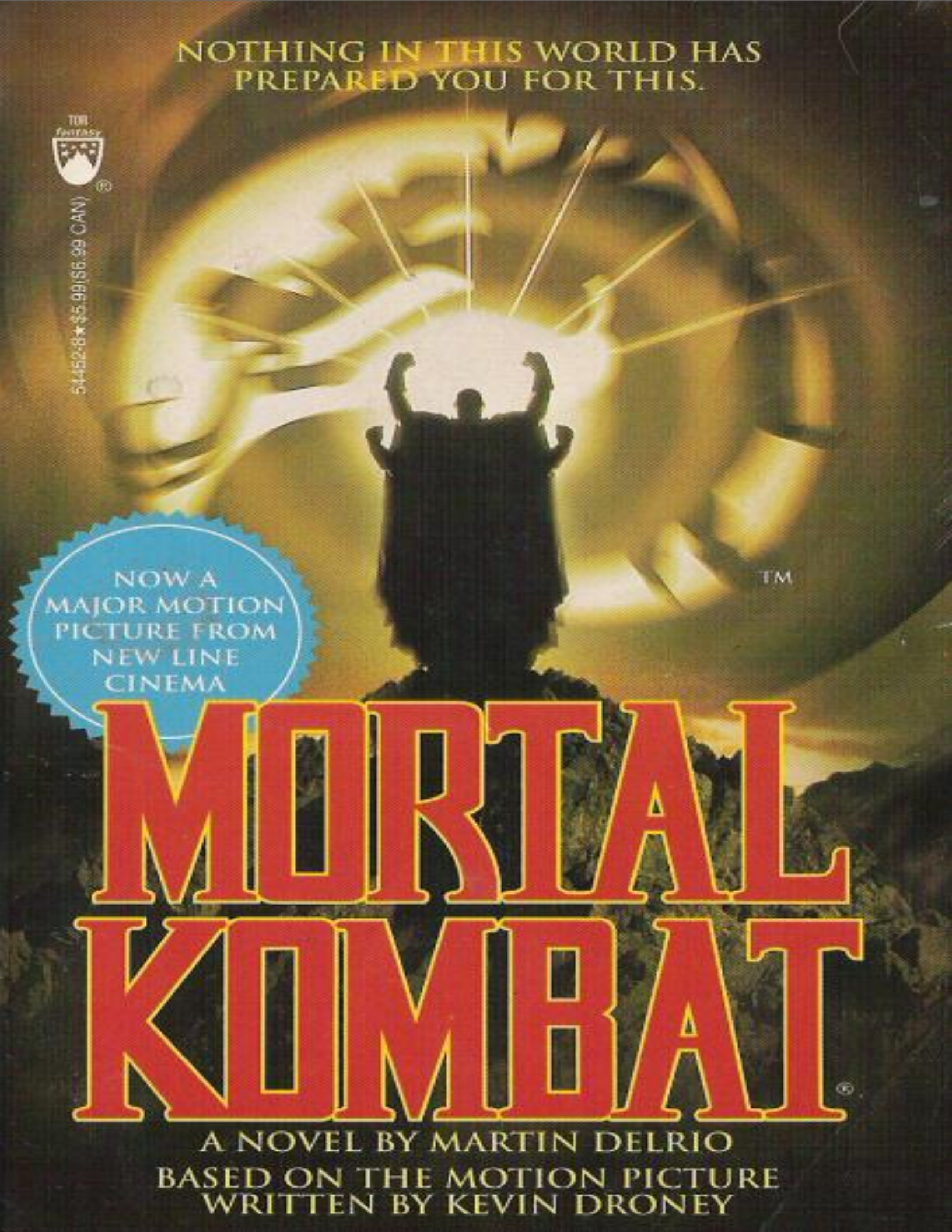
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Mortal Kombat

A Novel by Martin Delrio

Based on the Motion Picture

Written by Kevin Droney

MORTAL KOMBAT!

In the blink of an eye, Shang changed form, his body shifting into the appearance of a man in samurai's armor, sword raised over his head.

At the same moment an enormous ball of blue, crackling fire swept down through the hold. Electric discharges flew from the ball, and its light showed the group in startling detail. Sonya and Johnny stood back to back, each in a defensive stance, their form perfect. Their ninja opponents stood facing them, also in stance. Any icy fog lay about the feet of the ninja facing Sonya, while a serpent protruded from the hand of the ninja opposite Johnny.

The ball of blue lightning came smashing through...

Prologue

Swish – swish – swish.

Chan was sweeping the ancient stones of the courtyard with a rice-straw broom.

Dawn was coming, the sun rising in splendor across the bay. The first rays turned the roof of the pagoda, the Temple of the Order of Light, into golden fire behind him.

Swish – swish – swish.

The air was warm and yet clear. Chan felt simple satisfaction in performing his task well. But more than that, he felt pride. Pride in being chosen as the defender. Pride in the training he had received, and that he was continuing to receive, to fight in the Great Tournament.

As the descendant of Kung Lao, it was Chan's place to defend the Order of Light. And he would not fail. Not like his brother, who had forsaken the old ways and fled to America.

He thought briefly of Liu Kang, his brother. Liu was, perhaps, a better fighter, but he did not have faith.

Chan was startled out of his reverie by the sound of birds. All of the pigeons who roosted under the pagoda's eaves had suddenly taken wing. He looked up, still holding his broom.

No one was there, except one man – a stranger – walking slowly across the worn stones which Chan had just swept. The startled flock of pigeons whirled, then flew off rapidly across the bay. Chan had never seen them act like that, and despite the warm air of the morning, he felt a chill.

The man approached. When he had come within a double arm's reach, he halted.

The stranger's face was young, and his body was hard under his rich silks. And his mouth was cruel.

"Chan? Are you Chan?" the stranger said, his words forming a question although his tone said he already knew.

"Yes," Chan replied. "That is me."

"You think that you are to fight to defend the Earth," the stranger said. "That is not to be."

Chan looked at the stranger warily. “Perhaps you are mistaken, honored one.”

“I never make mistakes in that regard,” the man replied. He dropped into a fighting stance, his feet widely spaced, his hands floating at waist-level before him.

Chan gazed into the man’s eyes, and then he knew. The eyes were dark, deep and dark, with fire burning far away within them.

Demon eyes.

Chan bowed and took his own stance. “So this is the way it is to be,” he said.

“Regrettably, yes,” the demon replied. “Every man chooses his own path. You chose the wrong one.”

Chapter One

“Hey, Lieutenant!”

The radio intercept operator looked up from his console. Sweat was beaded on his forehead, his crew-cut hair damp where it wasn’t covered by the heavy earphones. He’d taken off the camouflage-uniform blouse and hung it over the back of his chair. The Army T-shirt he wore was a darker shade of brown around the neck and armpits from the perspiration.

“Yes? What do you have?”

Lieutenant Sonya Blade walked forward to stand behind the intercept operator. It was just as hot for her as for the operator inside in the intercept van, but she wasn’t showing it. Blonde hair, pinned up in military fashion, was perfectly arranged on her head. Her cammie uniform was pressed with sharp creases, every button buttoned. Her back was straight without being braced, her eyes clear and alert. First in her class at the Academy, first in her class in Basic Infantry training, first in her class at Special Warfare school, Lieutenant Blade wasn’t about to let a little discomfort rattle her cage.

“We have them located, ma’am. Crimmons, Shamoboa, Kano. They’re on the phone with each other, talking about their operations – conference call. I’m getting everything.” The man jerked his thumb at the big reels of tape slowly turning on the wall of the van.

“You’d think they’d use scramblers.”

“They are, lieutenant.” The radio intercept operator allowed himself to smile. “With the gear we have here, it doesn’t do them a damn bit of good.”

“Very well,” Lieutenant Blade said. “Get me a triangulation on their positions. If anything changes, inform me. I’ll be in the command post.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the operator said, and leaned forward to tweak a dial.

Lieutenant Blade opened the back door of the van and stepped out into the bright noonday sun. Leaving the enclosed space hadn’t done a thing for the heat of a Hong Kong summer. She paused for a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the glare, then stepped off in the direction of the command post.

The command post for the elite Joint Eurasian Anti-Drug Task Force wasn't much bigger than the van, but the air conditioning worked a lot better. The room's only decoration was a Thompson submachine gun in a display case on the wall.

Sonya walked in, and two men looked up from the table where they'd been studying a map.

"Good day, Sonya," said the taller of the two, his face breaking into an easy smile. "What cheer from the world of electronic intelligence?" He had a light accent. It could have been British, but was, in fact, Dutch.

She returned his smile. "The kingpins. All three of them."

"Ah." Lieutenant Bill van Hoven of the Royal Netherlands Marines regarded her with calm respect.

"I tell you what. Since you found them, I'll let you plan the operation to take them in," said the other man. He was a trim, well-muscled African-American with a major's gold oak leaves on his collar. The name strip above the right breast pocket of this uniform read BRIGGS.

"Take them in or take them out, it's all the same to me," van Hoven said.

"You're entirely too bloodthirsty, Bill," Major Briggs said. Jackson Briggs, known to his fellow officers as Jax, had long cultivated the philosophical approach. He stood at ease in the command post, and his tone was light and bantering as he continued. "Law enforcement in support of civilian authorities should be performed with the minimum amount of violence, and always with a regard for the finer things in life."

"You're the boss," Lieutenant van Hoven replied. He stepped aside to allow Sonya a place at the map table.

She leaned forward and marked positions on the map with a grease pencil. "A reinforced special-tactics platoon, divided into six half-squads, with the fourth squad held in reserve, should just about do it."

"I don't much care about the other bad guys," van Hoven said. He tapped his finger on one of the positions that Sonya had just marked. "You're in tactical command. But Kano – he's mine."

"You want the pleasure?" Sonya asked.

“Yes. I’ve been following that son of a bitch around the globe for the last three years. I want to be there when it ends.”

“This time he won’t get away,” Jax said.

“I know,” van Hoven said, with the same smile. “Sonya is planning the operation; nothing will go wrong.”

And that, Sonya reflected bitterly, some hours later, was the last thing that had gone right. The whole operation was SNAFU from the time the first team jumped out of the choppers. It was almost as if the bad guys had known they were coming.

She crouched in the shadow of a brick wall, her weapon ready and her eyes moving even while she spoke. “All units in Black Hawk, this is Cardinal,” she said, the small microphone on her headset transmitting her words to the other members of the team. “Report.”

“This is Echo One,” came an answer almost immediately. “No sign of target individual. Three troopers down. We’re taking fire.”

“This is Green Dragon,” came another voice. It sounded like Rodriguez, assistant squad leader of the second squad. That he was answering up meant Moresby couldn’t, and that wasn’t good. “Nobody home at this location. We’re taking casualties from booby traps.”

Sonya paused for a moment, waiting for the third team to answer. The radio link was silent. When the silence had gone on too long, she spoke: “Bell Whiskey, report.”

Silence.

“Bell Whiskey, report,” she repeated, more urgently.

“I don’t think they’re on the air,” Major Jax said, his voice coming from the radio over the command net from headquarters.

“Neither do I.”

She keyed the microphone to the tactical net again.

“Green Dragon, withdraw. Go to Echo One’s assistance. When you can extract Echo One, everyone fall back to the rendezvous position and form a perimeter.”

“Echo One, roger, out,” came the first reply, followed almost immediately by “Green Dragon, roger, out.”

“That’s taken care of,” Sonya said. “Okay.” She pointed at three of the troopers in the reserve squad. “Come on. You and me, we’re going to find Lieutenant Bill van Hoven. The rest of you, back to the rendezvous point. Hold it until everyone else gets in. I’ll join you there shortly.”

The small group led by Lieutenant Blade set out through the streets and alleys, heads up and weapons at the ready. The part of Hong Kong they’d been in wasn’t the greatest, and where they were going was even worse. It was the sort of place that gave slums a bad name.

Alleyways, already narrow and dark, got narrower and darker. Sonya flipped down her night-vision goggles in order to see where she was going. The eerie green glow of the goggles made the entire place seem unreal, like it was deep under water or on another planet.

That was when she found him.

Lieutenant Bill van Hoven lay prone on the garbage-strewn pavement, one of his arms under his head as if he were asleep. A pool of blood surrounded him.

“Located Bell Whiskey,” Sonya reported on the command net. “Bell Whiskey actually appears to be hurt. Going to assist, over.”

“Be careful, Cardinal, over.”

“I’m always careful,” Sonya replied. “Out.”

She slung her weapon and went forward to kneel beside the other lieutenant. He wasn’t breathing. No pulse. Her own heartbeat sounded loud in her ears.

“This wasn’t part of my plan,” she whispered.

One of the troopers came up beside her, reached out and turned Bill van Hoven over. His eyes were open and staring, an expression of horror on his face. And his throat had been cut so deep that Sonya was afraid for a moment that his head might come off entirely.

“Kano,” she said, keying the mike on her headset. “Kano set this up. He made sure we could intercept his messages. He planned it. We never had a chance.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Do?” Sonya laughed bitterly. “After tonight the investigation is blown. Five years of work down the tubes. But first I’m going to find Kano. And I’m going to kill him. With my bare hands, if necessary.”

“Kano isn’t within a mile of your location,” Jax said, the scrambler on the circuit making his voice scratchy.

“No, but I think I know where to find him. The Techno Club.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Jax replied over the radio. “Don’t go in without backup.”

“What makes you think I would, sir?” Sonya asked.

“I know you, Blade,” Jax’s answer came in her earpiece. “At the Techno Club, in ten. Black Hawk out.”

Sonya stood, unslinging her riot gun from her back and bringing it to the ready position.

“Okay,” she muttered. “Kano, this one’s for you. You have just succeeded in pissing me off.”

“*Art! Lean! Art! Lean!*”

It was the final round of the World Freestyle Karate Championships. Full contact. Full speed. And the crowd was on its feet, chanting, their voices filling the Stockholm arena.

Art Lean, a handsome, muscular African-American, shook his head to sling the sweat out of his eyes and twisted on his feet to find his opponent. When he moved, his legs moving like pistons, his skin gleaming like polished ebony, the referee scurried to stay out of his way.

Art changed his stance again, easy and slow, ready for anything. His opponent, Caesar Cerant, the Belgian national champion, was good – but Art knew he was better.

But where was Cerant now? The ring was small, nowhere to hide...

“Behind me,” Art muttered, and leapt straight up, just as a reaping kick from behind came in, fast enough to make the air whistle. It would have been enough to hamstring a man, perhaps break his leg, had it connected – but Art wasn’t there. He turned a somersault in midair, twisting like a

cat. There was his opponent, off balance and out of position, trying to recover from the missed kick.

"*Art! Lean! Art! Lean!*" the crowd roared again.

Art landed in a crouch. Then, without pausing for a second, he launched himself forward again, his right hand shooting out in a heel-hand strike, directly into Caesar's torso, just beneath the point of his breastbone. The Belgian went pale, the breath driven out of him. But he still began to take a stance, ready to renew his attack.

"Not so fast, sucker," Art breathed. The American spun, the edge of his foot taking the Belgian in the back of one knee, while at the same time Art's forearm slammed into the front of his opponent's chest at the level of his collarbone. His opponent fell backward, fast. He hit the canvas and lay on his back. In a flash Art was kneeling beside him. The tall African-American smashed his palm down toward the Belgian's face, his arm moving almost too fast to see. He stopped a fraction short of the delicate cartilage in the man's nose, a fraction short of the killing blow.

"It's over," Art said, standing.

And all at once, the referee was there, raising his hand, while another man was attaching something heavy around Art's waist: the championship belt. Attendants fluttered around the fallen man, reviving him, checking his vital signs, his reflexes.

Art stood tall, paying no attention to those around him. His hands were raised in the victory salute, while the crowd surrounding the arena chanted his name, louder and louder.

Then it was indeed over. Art shrugged on his robe, black with scarlet trim, and climbed between the ropes. Head high, he strode toward the dressing room.

A massage would sure feel good right about now, he thought. A massage, a shower, and about twelve hours of sleep. The door to the small dressing room banged shut behind him.

Surprisingly, he found himself alone. The crowd was missing. No trainers, no reporters looking for an interview. Nothing but his locker and the padded massage table.

He turned to leave, to see where everyone had gone, but his eye caught a small object lying on the table. It was a scroll, a strip of tight white paper rolled around twin sticks of hard black wood. A red ribbon bound the scroll closed, and a large seal of black wax hung from the ribbon.

Without knowing why, Art felt his blood run cold. The scroll was out of place here, he thought, trying to make sense of the unexpected sensation. It was wrong, an artifact from the ancient past come unstuck in time.

Art approached it slowly, as if hypnotized by the object. He nudged the seal with his finger. Nothing, just a plain disk of wax. For no apparent reason he got the same feeling of being watched that he had experienced in the ring, when Caesar Cerant had gotten behind him.

Art glanced back over his shoulder. No one was there.

Then, impulsively, he reached out with his left hand and flipped the seal over. It bore a design on the other side: a stylized dragon head in a circle. The dragon's tongue curled out, forked into a double point; its eyes were narrow and evil.

Art knew, deep in his bones, that this was something he shouldn't even mess with. But at the same time he knew that he wasn't going to rest until he knew everything about the scroll and what it contained. He picked up the scroll.

Without allowing himself a pause for second thoughts, he broke the seal.

"What a hell of a way to make a living."

Johnny Cage paused outside the doors of the warehouse. The Florida sun glinted off his dark glasses.

He pulled his pistol from the holster hidden under his Italian-tailored sportcoat. With his other hand he pulled out his wallet and flipped it open to show a detective's gold shield. He pushed the back of the ID holder into his breast pocket so the shield was displayed, then straightened.

"Only one chance to do it right. I've got another assignment starting tomorrow."

He counted slowly to himself, from ten down to one. On one he dodged in through the open door of the warehouse. Johnny paused on the inside to take stock.

"I'm a cop," he recited, getting his head to where it had to be. "The chief hates me, thinks I'm a cowboy. My partner's on the take. The other cops think I'm a crook like my partner. I've got to prove myself."

He looked over the contents of the warehouse. From where he stood, he could see that the warehouse was jammed with fifty-five gallon drums stenciled with their contents: acetone, diethyl ether, caustic soda.

"Bingo," he said, quietly. "All the ingredients for extracting cocaine. Looks like someone's setting up a drug lab."

Another thought: "That stuff's all flammable, explosive, or corrosive. One stray shot in here and the whole place could go up."

He shoved his pistol back into its holster, and with infinite care began to make his way into the cavernous warehouse.

Johnny reached the center of the space. Whoever was financing this operation had to be big. There were enough chemicals here to supply the Colombian cartels for a year.

A sound, something metallic tapping on one of the drums, came from behind him.

Johnny turned. A man, big, wearing a neatly-tailored suit – probably an Armani, Johnny thought – emerged from between two rows of palletized chemical drums.

"You shouldn't have come," the man said. "Now you've seen too much for us to let you leave."

"Us?"

"Us," said another voice. A new man, just as big and just as ugly as the first, emerged from the opposite direction. Then, silent as ghosts, two more appeared from between the crates and barrels, surrounding Johnny in an open square. The latest two were carrying automatic rifles – Stoners.

It could've been worse, Johnny thought. At least he wasn't dragging along some broad whose bra size was bigger than her IQ, to slow him down and get in the way. He'd been in that kind of situation too many times in the course of his career.

The men with the rifles put them down, leaning them against the nearest piles of supplies. All four began to close in on him.

Johnny just smiled, a tight-lipped smile without any real mirth behind it.

With one hand he pulled off his dark glasses. He looked from one of the plug-uglies to the next, looking deep into each one's eyes. They were lots closer now.

"Okay," Johnny said. "Let's dance."

As if on cue the four rushed at Johnny from all sides. Johnny dropped and rolled, flinging his dark glasses in the face of the nearest goon, making the man flinch away.

The goon shouted, surprised, but Johnny was already behind him. A karate punch to the back of the skull told the man where Johnny had gone, and then they went at it.

"Just like practice," Johnny muttered, dropping to one knee to let a kick fly over his head, then grabbing the leg and pulling, making the thug hit the concrete floor flat on his back. The man rolled to his feet.

Then Johnny was rolling himself, dodging the rain of fists and feet that was flying at him from all directions. He spun one goon into the path of another's sidekick, watching as the man groaned, clutching his belly, and sank to the floor.

"One down, three to go."

Johnny took the second man's arm as an open-hand blow whistled at him, and stepped inside of it. One, two, three elbow strikes to the man's ribs, and Johnny let him drop, to sink down and join his companion. Johnny finished him with a vicious kick to the jaw. The man twitched and lay still.

"Two down."

One of the remaining men was scrambling for an automatic rifle.

"No you don't," Johnny said. "Don't you know little boys shouldn't play with guns?"

He launched himself into a whirling front flip, springing forward and making it impossible for the man to aim. His hand grabbed the barrel of the weapon near the muzzle, while his foot leapt out in a powerful kick that knocked the man's grip away.

Johnny still held the rifle. He used its butt to smash into the third man's face. He, too, sank to the floor. Johnny dropped the rifle with a clatter.

"Three down," he muttered.

The first man he had struck was approaching, hands in front in the classic open position, ready to grasp, strike, or block. Johnny let him come, holding his ground, trying to look more tired than he felt. *Let him get close,* Johnny through. *Then I can finish this and go home.*

With a terrifying cry, the man launched himself at Johnny, covering the last few steps with a high leap. His hands came together on thin air. Johnny dropped to his knees, his hand smashing forward to take the fourth goon in the crotch.

For a moment the two men froze, staring at each other. The goon look confused.

"This is where you fall down," he said.

A look of relief came over the man's face, and he flew backward, away from Johnny's blow, to land curled in a ball. Pain lined his face as he lay on the floor near his three companions.

Johnny stood and strode away from his fallen opponents. Throwing his hands in the air, he yelled, "Where do you *get* these guys?"

"Cut!" yelled the director.

The four goons stood up, brushed each other off, and ambled away in search of coffee. The director, a young man with a beard and a ponytail, came down into the set.

"Sorry, Johnny," he said. "I promise, the next take will work fine."

Johnny only scowled at him. "And the press says *I* don't know how to do this stuff."

The director looked around. "All right, everybody!" he yelled. "Reset! We do it again in fifteen minutes!"

"You can do it by yourself," Johnny said. He stalked off past a row of stage lights. "I'm not running the scene again."

"Johnny, come on," the director said, hurrying after his departing star. "It's the last shot of the picture."

"Make it up from outtakes," Johnny snarled. "I'm out of here."

Johnny left the set and walked over to his chair in the actor's area. What he saw didn't make him feel any better. Someone else was already sitting in the chair that had his name written across the

back. What was worse, the someone was holding a tabloid newspaper in front of his face – a newspaper whose front-page headline read JOHNNY CAGE A FAKE! The picture under the headline showed Johnny, his face contorted with rage, yelling at some of the photographers who followed him everywhere.

"Hey, you!" Johnny said. "Hey, that's my chair!"

The man lowered his newspaper. And in an instant, Johnny's rage changed to awe. The man sitting in his chair was Bill Boyd, the greatest Occidental karate master.

Master Boyd had found Johnny Cage, a poor kid running wild in the streets of Brooklyn, and had transformed him. The old man had taught Johnny about tradition. About discipline. About respect for himself and others. All of the young men whom Johnny had run with before he met Boyd were dead now; dead, or in jail, or in the gutter strung out on drugs. Only Johnny, the movie star, remained.

Cage stopped, drew himself in, and made a low bow of respect. "Master," he said. "Sorry, I didn't... I owe you a debt that can never be repaid."

Master Boyd gestured at the newspaper. "I see the press is still giving you a hard time."

"They think I'm a big fake," Johnny said. "These pudgy, out-of-shape men who write film reviews think that they can judge what's real and what isn't."

"A fake?" Boyd said. "I know that you're not."

"Sensei, you were my idol growing up. It means a lot, you saying that."

"Johnny, you're one of the best martial artists in the world. And I know a way you can prove it."

"Prove it? How?" Johnny was puzzled now, as puzzled as he had been angry the moment before.

"A tournament. *The* tournament. Held once a generation."

"I can't fight in tournaments," Johnny said. "The producers' insurance companies won't allow it. They say, 'Suppose he broke his jaw, he couldn't go on camera, and we'll lose our investment.' My not being able to fight in competition is what gives me my lousy reputation." He gestured in disgust at the newspaper Boyd held.

“You can fight in this one,” Boyd said. He reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a small scroll with ebony handles.

Johnny took the scroll and unrolled it. The paper felt old, old yet strangely flexible beneath his fingers. To his dismay, the scroll was written in Chinese characters. In their midst was a dramatic icon, a dragon’s head in a circle.

“I gotta brush up on my Chinese,” Johnny said after studying the writing for a moment.

“It is unlikely that you could read it anyway,” Boyd said. “The dialect is quite old. It speaks of the most ancient and most honorable tournament in the world, held on an island in the South China Sea.”

Johnny rolled the scroll up again. “I’ve never heard of that tournament,” he said.

“Not surprising,” Boyd replied. “All of the participants are sworn to secrecy.”

“How can a secret tournament get me better press?” Johnny asked.

“The best fighters in the world are invited,” Boyd said, shifting slightly forward in Johnny’s chair, as if to give more emphasis to his words. “If you win the tournament, you’ll win their respect. They’ll tell the entire world that you’re the real goods.”

Something didn’t seem right to Johnny. Had Master Boyd really cared that much about reputation back in the old days, when he was teaching honesty and self-respect to a punk kid from the streets? Johnny paused. “I’m... I’m supposed to be prepping for my next film as soon as this one wraps tonight,” he began. “I just don’t see...”

Boyd looked deep into Johnny’s eyes. “I see,” he said. He reached out for the scroll. “You’ve changed, Johnny. If your name isn’t as important to you as your box-office receipts, then there’s nothing more to say.”

Johnny felt a sudden flush of humiliation. “No!” he said, pulling the scroll away from his sensei. “I mean, I’m honored. I’ll work around it somehow. I’ll fight in the tournament.”

Master Boyd favored Johnny with one of his rare smiles. “I’ve got a lot of faith in you,” he said.

“How do I, uh, get to...?”

“There will a ship, the *Dragon Wing*, at Pier Forty in Hong Kong tomorrow night. Be on it.”

Johnny looked down at the scroll in his hand, in wonder at what he had just done, what he had just agreed to do.

He looked up again a fraction of a second later, but Master Boyd was nowhere to be seen.

“Sensei?” Johnny said.

From somewhere far away, a pair of eyes – deep eyes, with flames burning at their bottoms – watched Johnny as he searched for his master.

Chapter Two

Liu Kang stirred restlessly in his bed. His head was pounding, and the sheets were holding him back as he thrashed. He was dreaming, and he knew that he was dreaming, but he couldn't wake up.

Liu was a slender, muscular Asian man in his mid-twenties. His cheerful smile and playful sense of humor made him a lot of friends, both male and female. He'd had no trouble adjusting to life in the United States after coming there five years before.

Right now, however, it was difficult to tell you how handsome he was: his teeth were tightly gritted, his lips drawn back. The cords of his neck stood out as he strained. His hands were clenched into claws.

"No, no," he moaned, his head twisting on the pillow. "No..."

Out of the darkness, in his dreams, he saw eyes. Burning eyes, Coming closer and closer. Eyes, and hands. Bony hands with nails like talons, reaching for him. A howling sound like a rising wind, like a thousand souls in pain, filled his ears. He tossed in his bed trying to get away, but the nightmare continued. His head pounded in a steady rhythm.

The pounding in his head grew louder. It began to penetrate his sleep-fogged mind that, however ethereal the eyes, hands, and howls were, the pounding was real. Someone was knocking on the door of his apartment, loud enough to wake the dead.

"All right, all right," Liu said, his eyes sliding open. "I'm coming."

He swung his legs to the floor. It took a moment before he was ready to stand, grab a robe, and struggle toward the door. And all the while the pounding went on.

He twisted back the dead bolt on the door, then swung it open a crack.

A man in a blue-gray uniform stood in the hall, holding a clipboard in his hand.

"Telegram for Mr. Liu Kang," the man said. "Are you Mr. Kang?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's me."

"Sign here, please, sir."

Liu scrawled something on the line the man was pointing to, and took the flimsy envelope from the messenger.

"Thanks," Liu said, and turned back into his apartment, closing the door behind him with his shoulders. He walked into the kitchen nook and turned on the electric burner under the tea kettle. As long as he was awake anyway, he might as well stay up. He was in no hurry to get back to the dreams he'd just been having anyway.

The sun was rising in San Francisco, filling the apartment with ruddy light. Liu dragged one of his two chairs up to the kitchen table and sat. He looked at the telegram for a moment. Then he slit the top edge of the envelope with his thumbnail. The sheet of flimsy paper inside fell to the table. Liu picked it up and read it.

"Oh, crap," he said.

He wadded the telegram in his hand and dropped it to the table top. "Oh, crap," he said again.

He shook his head as if to clear it, then stood. With a sudden burst of energy he strode into his bedroom and dressed, pulling on a blue chambray work shirt, jeans, boots, and a leather jacket. Liu scooped up his wallet from the top of the bedside table and his passport from the drawer beneath.

Back in the kitchen he picked up the phone. He dialed a number and spoke.

"Hello, Sarah? Tell Mr. Fitch I won't be in to work today. No, I don't know when I'll be back. Something's come up."

He hung up and dialed again. "I'd like a reservation on the next flight for Hong Kong... Yeah, I'm paying by credit card... Yeah, yeah... in the name of Liu Kang. Thanks."

The tea kettle began to whistle. Liu reached over and turned off the heat. His call to the airline finished, he walked out the door and locked it behind him. He left behind an unmade bed and, lying on the table, a crumbled telegram:

LIU KANG. BROTHER DEAD. RETURN HOME. GRANDFATHER.

“Black Hawk, this is Cardinal. How copy, over.”

“Roger, Cardinal, copy all, over.”

“Roger, Black Hawk. We have the target in sight. Send blocking groups to cover all exits.”

“Roger, out.”

“So much for the easy part,” Sonya Blade muttered.

The lieutenant was standing at the edge of an open square across from the Techno Club, a nightspot in an upper-class Hong Kong neighborhood. She wore a dark blue uniform and a radio headset, with canteens and ammo pouches hanging from her web gear. On the other side of the square, garish neon lights outlined the doors of the Techno Club. The club’s entire front was a huge video wall, where an Asian woman in traditional garb looked directly out across the square.

“Welcome to Hong Kong,” the woman on the video said, her voice blasting above the clatter of taxis and buses. “Welcome to Hong Kong, home of fine food and ancient traditions, where you will always receive a happy welcome. Welcome to Hong Kong...”

Sonya looked down at her watch.

“Party time,” she said, and walked across the square as inconspicuously as possible for a blonde American woman carrying a riot gun at high port.

Sonya stopped directly beneath the video wall.

“...Home of fine food and ancient traditions...”

the twenty foot tall woman’s head boomed above her.

Another shadow joined Sonya. Jax.

“Is the perimeter secure?” Sonya asked as he approached.

“Locked down tight,” Jax replied. “I just got done inspecting it myself. Trust me.”

“I only trust one person on this planet, and you’re talking with her.” She keyed her headset mike. “Sixty seconds to target. I say again, sixty seconds to target. Stand by.”

“You’re really going into a civilian nightclub?” Jax asked.

“I really am,” Sonya said. “I want Kano.”

“Okay, lieutenant,” Jax said. “I’ll back you on this play. But you’d better be right. Here are the rules of engagement: Use only the minimum amount of force required to complete the mission. No civilian casualties.”

Sonya checked her watch, the sweep-second hand moving toward twelve. “Roger that, minimum force. Okay, coming up on time.”

She keyed the mike again. “This is it. Go, go, go.”

Sonya swung into the doorway, slamming the door open. With Jax behind her she stormed down a narrow corridor. Three more Special Forces troopers detached from the shadows and followed the two officers in.

The corridor opened up into a room lit with dim red lights. A band on a moving platform swung high above the packed dance floor. Lights strobed and lasers traced designs on the walls and ceiling.

A solid Asian man in a black tuxedo appeared before them. He held up his hand like a traffic cop. “Sorry, folks,” he said. “Private club. Can’t come in without an invitation.”

“Here’s my invitation,” Sonya said, and swung the butt of her riot gun into his jaw, punching her right hand out straight from the shoulder. She didn’t slow as she stepped over his unconscious form and into the room.

“Sucker didn’t look like a civilian anyway,” Jax said, as he too stepped over the bouncer’s body.

The Techno Club was packed wall-to-wall with young people of all ages and races. The music was deafening. Visibility of more than a few yards was obscured by haze from an artificial smoke generator up on the stage.

“What are you going to do if there are bad guys in the crowd?” Jax asked. The major had to shout in order to make himself heard over the noise.

“Handle it,” Sonya replied.

“Handle it, the lady says,” Jax muttered, as two unsmiling men dressed in dark suits converged on him from out of the fog smoke. They didn’t look like dancers. One of them started reaching inside his jacket where a shoulder holster might be. Jax reached out, grabbed the two of them by the backs of their heads and cracked their skulls together.

“Spread out,” Sonya called over her wireless headset mike as the two men fell to the floor behind her. “Find Kano.”

Behind her Jax pointed to right and left, directing the troopers with hand signals. Sonya plunged ahead into the crowd. A man put his hand on her wrist. She broke the hand for him and continued forward, looking sharply to right and left. The crowd filled in behind her as she made her way across the dance floor.

In a soundproof office, behind a glass window overlooking the dance floor, a man stood facing outward. The room was lit only by the reflected glow from the main part of the club. His massive shoulders spoke of the power in his body.

“She’s here, Shang Tsung,” he said.

He turned away from the window to face the interior of the office. In the darkness his silhouette against the window was broken only by a red glow coming from his right eye, where a metal plate glistened from cheek to forehead. He glanced in the direction of a sitting figure, an old man in traditional Oriental garb who sat cross-legged on one of the crates which stood against the back wall of the office.

The big man glanced at his watch. “Right on time. I love punctuality in a woman, don’t you?”

His companion was silent.

The big man smiled, the dim glow picking up the reflections from his white teeth and the metal plate.

He walked over to the far side of the office. A large packing crate rested there. He bent and picked it up, seemingly without effort, though it must have weighed hundreds of pounds. Beneath the place where the crate had stood, a grate was set into the stone floor, its iron tracery making a paler grid against the deep black below. The man bent, lifted the heavy grate, and set it, too, aside.

The seated man had opened his eyes at last. In the darkened office they glowed as if a fire burned within them. “So your bolt-hole is ready, Kano,” he said, breaking his silence at last. His voice was deep and harsh. “You know what you must do.”

“I do.” Kano hesitated. “Shang Tsung, are you sure she’ll follow me down there?” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the open grating.

The other answered softly. “Kano, Kano. You killed her partner. She’ll follow you into hell. Just make sure that she gets on my ship.”

“Sure thing, sorcerer,” Kano said. He paused, considering for a moment. “Hey, she isn’t too bad looking. Maybe me and Sonya can share a cabin, have a little honeymoon cruise.”

“Foolish little man,” Shang Tsung said, his voice barely above a whisper. “If you so much as touch her without my permission, not even death will release you from the torments I will provide. The girl is mine.”

“Sure, sure, just kidding,” Kano said, and turned back to the window. Behind him, flames blazed in Shang Tsung’s eyes.

Out in the main part of the club, Lieutenant Blade had nearly crossed the dance floor, her path marked by a trail of fallen men. She looked up and spotted the glass wall ahead of her. A darker man-shape loomed behind it, a single glowing point where his right eye should have been. Sonya keyed her mike again.

“Kano’s in the office,” she said. “I’m going in.”

“Negative, negative,” Jax’s voice sounded in her earpiece. “Wait for backup!”

“No time,” Sonya said. “I’m going in.”

She spotted a man standing in front of the window wall, a man in a dark suit holding a rifle in his hands, his head turreting from side to side as he scanned the dance floor.

Sonya thumbed the slide release on her riot gun and racked a cartridge into the chamber. She swung the weapon to bear on the guard and fired from the hip.

The flash and the roar of the riot gun were lost in the music and the strobe lights of the club, but the non-lethal rubber bullet from Sonya's riot gun took the thug in mid-chest. The impact lifted him from his feet and sent him crashing back through the glass window in a shower of sparkling fragments.

The man was still in the air when Sonya launched herself forward, jacking a new round into the chamber of her weapon as she came. She went through the broken window in a flat forward dive, tucked and rolled, coming up with her weapon ready, pointing it at each of the corners of the room in turn as she scanned the area for more opponents. Her eyes fell on the opening in the floor and the grate standing beside it.

"Oh, hell," she muttered. The place was deserted. She stood up from her combat crouch. "Jax, I'm in the office," she said over the headset. "Looks like we lost him."

She turned back toward the broken window and spotted the fallen goon. The man was lying on his back amid the glass shards. The impact of the rubber slug had torn away his shirt in front, revealing the flak jacket beneath his clothing.

Sonya swung the riot gun onto her back, and pulled her nine-millimeter automatic from the holster on her hip. She squatted beside the fallen man and jammed the muzzle of the pistol into the soft place beneath his jaw. With her other hand she twisted up his collar to keep him from squirming away from the shock of the cold metal.

"Okay, buddy," she said. "Talk. Where is he? Where did he go?"

The water taxi pulled away from the landing in front of the Temple of the Order of Light, its outboard motor puttering. Liu Kang remained standing on the worn stones of the temple's courtyard. He had swept that area more times than he could remember, during the years he had been in training for the tournament. Now he stood with his hands on his hips, the setting sun sending dancing reflections from the water to play about the peaked roof of the pagoda.

Pigeons strutted across the flagstones, cooing in their soft voices, pecking in the cracks between the stones. Their peaceful voices echoed the quiet lapping of the waves at the landing.

It had been years since he last stood here, Liu Kang thought. Years, and yet the temple was still the same. Once he had thought to be a champion. But he had turned his back on all that, on the superstitions of the past, and had set off to make a new life for himself in America. He'd never believed that he would stand here again.

The silence stretched out almost interminably. Liu stood, part of him wanting to enter the temple, another part of him wanting to flee. Then he was aware of an old man hobbling across the courtyard from the gates of the temple.

Liu recognized him. Grandfather. Like the temple, Grandfather, too, was changeless. As far back as Liu could remember, Grandfather had seemed to be ancient beyond reckoning.

The old man approached Liu, stopping an arm's reach away. Liu bowed in respect to his grandfather, and received the same greeting in return. Then the old one spoke.

"It's good that you are here, grandson. You have been missed."

Liu felt the grief which he had kept bottled up inside ever since he'd received the telegram, less than twenty-four hours before, begin to bubble inside him.

"I wasn't here when Chan needed me," he said.

"You chose your own path. Chan understood that."

Grandfather turned back toward the temple. "Come," he said. "There is much to talk about now."

Liu followed beside and a little behind him, showing proper filial devotion. "What happened?" he asked quietly.

"After you left for America," Grandfather replied, choosing his words carefully, "Chan followed in your footsteps, preparing for the tournament."

"The tournament!" Liu exclaimed. He stopped, suddenly full of angry disbelief, the same anger that had taken him away from the Temple in the first place. "Wasn't it enough that you filled my head with that nonsense?"

The old man's expression grew even sadder. "To save the world is not nonsense, grandson."

"Men fighting men in a simple contest don't save anything, Grandfather! How can you believe these country superstitions?"

"We all believe in it, Liu Kang," the old man said. "Once you believed. Your bother believed. He trained very hard. But he could never be as good a you..."

"I should have been here," Liu said. "He needed me, and I wasn't here."

Grandfather put his arms around Liu's shoulders.

"Please do not think of what might have been," he said. "The past is a path we travel only once. The path we choose to reach tomorrow is always fresh. We have choices there."

The two men stood in silence for a moment. Then Liu spoke again, his voice very slow and quiet.

"Grandfather... I dreamt Chan's death. And in my dream... I saw his killer. A man with eyes like red fire."

"You saw the demon sorcerer, Shang Tsung," Grandfather said, after a pause long enough to make Liu nervous. "Come. It is vital now that you speak with the chief priests of our order, and that you tell them what you just told me."

The two walked into the temple precincts. Liu had not been there in years, and now he looked about with fresh eyes, seeing the lacquered and enameled wood, the rich gold, and the scarlet porcelain which covered every inch of the temple of the Order of Light, the temple dedicated to Rayden.

The two of them made their way into an inner room, a cool, dark chamber where braziers sent the smoke of incense into the air, sweetening it with a smell like flowers. The priests of the temple gathered in a circle around them, kneeling on the timeworn floor, their red robes pure as the flame.

"It is as I told you," Grandfather said, addressing the chief priest, an old man with a bald head, the only one of the red-robed priests to be standing. "Liu Kang is the Chosen One. He has had the Dream."

"No!" said the chief priest. It was clear that the two of them were merely renewing an old argument long rehearsed between them. "This young man is not one of us. Liu Kang left our temple. He turned his back on the ancient ways and the ancient traditions. He should never have returned. He cannot be the one favored by Rayden."

"You are incorrect," Grandfather said. "Many paths may reach the same destination. That he did not take the path we expected–"

"He is no longer one of us," the chief priest said again, interrupting Grandfather. "Rayden does not give his blessings to unbelievers."

The priest turned to address Liu directly. “Why did you come back?”

“I want to represent the Order of Light at the tournament,” Liu replied, bowing low in what he hoped was a properly humble posture.

“For what reason?” the chief priest insisted. “You must tell me that.”

“The man who killed my brother will likely be there, at the tournament,” Liu replied, looking directly into the chief priest’s eyes.

“That cannot be your only motive for going,” the chief priest said. “It is unworthy. Should you go to the tournament with vengeance as the motive in your heart, you will fail!”

“Ah, yes, I forgot,” Liu said. His voice was mocking. The other priests of Rayden were taken aback by the direct way in which he spoke to the chief priest. “We’re supposed to be fighting for the fate of the world.”

A louder voice than the chief priest’s rolled into the chamber. “And that is why you left the temple and ran away, isn’t it? You were unwilling to take the responsibility to fight for the world!”

Liu started at the sound and turned. No one capable of making such a forceful comment appeared to be there. Only a frail beggar stood beside the door, his head covered by a coolie’s straw hat, his clothing ragged and dirty. The straw hat concealed his face completely. The stranger had a stout wooden stick in his hand – a walking staff, Liu supposed. It seemed impossible to Liu that such a frail-looking man could have produced such a commanding voice.

The newcomer’s feet were bare. Anyone looking at him, Liu thought, would have to suppose that he lived entirely on rice and fish balls, and not much of either one. Nevertheless, the beggar walked into the inner room of the temple with a steady, purposeful gait. He appeared so frail that it seemed a strong wind would take him away, but in spite of that, Liu had never seen anyone with such an air of command.

The chief priest stepped forward. “Who dares?” he said, his voice quiet. “Who dares to enter this holy place with his head covered?”

The beggar did not stop the answer. He strode forward until he stood directly in front of Liu. Then he lifted his head so that, for the first time, his face was visible beneath the battered coolie hat. The beggar’s features were strong and regular, neither old nor young, and his expression spoke of both knowledge and wisdom.

Yet for all that, the newcomer's eyes were his most startling feature. They were both infinitely sad and infinitely caring. And they seemed to glow with a blue light.

Liu's grandfather was the first to react. To Liu's astonishment, Grandfather fell prostrate on the polished stones of the temple floor. He lay in front of the beggar.

"The lord Rayden!" Grandfather exclaimed. "Lord Rayden, have mercy on us! We are not worthy! We are not worthy."

Chapter Three

The priests of the Order of Light sat still for a moment, observing the strange sight of Grandfather lying on his belly on the stones, his arms outstretched before a beggar, moaning, "Lord Rayden, protect us."

Then, one by one, they too prostrated themselves before the frail figure.

All except Liu. He looked from the beggar to the priests, to his grandfather, then back to the beggar.

"Young Liu," the beggar said. "You are still running from your destiny."

"Rayden?" Liu said, his voice mocking. He turned to where the others lay on the floor. "Grandfather! Get up! This isn't your god of thunder and lightning. He's just a beggar."

"Mercy, mercy, please," Grandfather begged, not moving from his place on the stones. "Liu is my only living grandchild. Spare him, Lord Rayden. American life has enfeebled his mind. He watches too much television!"

The beggar ignored everyone except Liu.

"So," he said. "You're going to win the tournament. A tournament which, if memory serves, you didn't even believe in at this time yesterday."

"Yes," Liu said calmly. "I am."

The beggar nodded, regarding Liu gravely. He began to walk around Liu, observing him from every angle, his expression unreadable. When he had come full circle and again faced Liu, the man spoke again.

"Show me how you are going to win the tournament."

As he spoke the newcomer took a step back, lifting his staff. For an instant he spun the staff before him so fast that it became a blur. Then he halted its motion. The sound of the wood striking the flesh of his left hand as he checked its swing echoed in the inner temple. The staff was steady now, as unmoving as if man and staff were both sculpted out of iron.

Liu didn't move.

"Come," the old man said. "Don't tell me you're afraid of a humble *beggar*?"

"No," Liu said. "I'm not afraid of anyone."

He dropped back into a simple defensive position and regarded his foe. The beggar's stance was firm, but, Liu decided, not very good. He had left openings three different places: at his flank, at his leg, and at his head. Very well, Liu thought, I'll teach this beggar some humility. One quick kick to the head will put him on the floor.

Liu jumped, his right leg flying out in a classic high snap kick. But instead of connecting with flesh and bone, his foot contacted only air. He landed in a crouch, and resumed his guard position. The beggar was standing as he had been, unruffled.

The beggar spoke then. "In the Great Tournament five centuries ago, your ancestor, Kung Lao, defeated Shang Tsung the sorcerer."

On the last word, the beggar's staff lashed out, a lightning-quick blow aimed at Liu's ribs. Liu saw it coming, slid his left foot back and turned to counter the blow. But before he could parry, he found his feet swept out from under him by the other end of the staff. He landed flat on his back in an ignominious heap, stunned by the impact.

The beggar's eyes blazed with cold fire, and he raised his staff as if to strike. He remained so for an instant, then relaxed.

"You are Kung Lao's last living descendant," the beggar said in a disgusted tone. "But you reject all that you've learned. You don't believe in the teachings of your ancestors and you don't believe in yourself."

He stepped back then, returning his staff to his side. Once again it was a prop for a frail old man. The beggar's eyes returned to their normal state.

"If you are Rayden," Liu said, as he rolled up and returned to his feet, "why did you let Chan die? He was dedicated to your service! Why didn't you protect him?"

"He was your brother," the beggar replied harshly. "Why didn't *you*?"

Liu stood for a moment in silence, his face flushed. "I should have," he said simply.

The beggar smiled a sad smile. "The gods do not control men's destinies," he said. "Nor do the gods protect men from their destiny." He paused again, then snapped, "I'm not your bodyguard!"

The last comment hit Liu like a slap. “You old fraud!” he exclaimed! He looked at the priests, still prostrate before the beggar, their red robes like splashes of blood on the pavement. “Why do you put up with this nonsense?” he said to them.

No one replied.

Liu turned again to face the frail old man. ’I’ve had enough of this,” he said. “I’m going to find my brother’s killer at the Tournament. With your consent or without!”

With those words Liu Kang fled from the Temple of the Order of Light, the sound of his running footsteps growing fainter and fainter. The beggar stood leaning on his staff until the last echo had faded. Then he walked to where Grandfather still lay prostrate, silently praying for his grandson.

“Rise now, honored one. It is past time we had a talk.”

Grandfather climbed to his feet. The two walked to the door of the inner temple and stood watching the sun as it set across the bay.

“He isn’t ready, my lord,” Grandfather said. “And we’ve lost so much time.”

“I know. But there is no one else.”

The beggar began to walk out of the temple, but before he crossed the threshold he turned and addressed all of them: Grandfather, the chief priest, and all of the other priests. His voice rolled like thunder in the mountains.

“You should not have tried to replace him with his brother. Like it or not, Liu Kang is my Chosen One.”

With that he turned again and strode from the temple, his staff tapping on the stones. Behind him, he left silence and praying men.

The night was clammy and dark. Down in this section of the waterfront, Johnny Cage thought, they’d never heard of street lights. What illumination there was came from the westering moon, from the sky-glow from the rest of Hong Kong, and from tiny work lights on the sides of warehouses.

The hired limousine he'd gotten at the airport moved slowly while the driver constantly muttered to himself in Chinese. Whether he was checking street directions, cursing out his passenger, or praying for safety, Johnny couldn't tell.

The car hit a particularly nasty pothole and lurched, its shock absorbers bottoming out.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" Johnny called out.

"Sorry, boss, I do the best I can," the driver replied. "We're almost there now."

"Where? I can't see a thing."

"Pier Forty, just like you say." The driver took a sharp right and braked. "This is it. Okay, you get out here. You want ride back to town, you pay me again."

"No, if this is Pier Forty, it's where I want to be."

In the glare of the headlights Johnny could see that he wasn't going to be alone on the pier. Men and women of all races and apparent professions were lounging around, standing talking in small groups, or pacing back and forth.

Johnny opened his door and stepped out. The humidity in the air hit him like he was stepping into a wet towel. He walked around to the back of the limo, where the driver was pulling his suitcases, matched black leather, out of the trunk and stacking them on the ground between slimy puddles. Johnny was just as glad that it was dark, so he couldn't see too clearly what might be floating there.

The door of the limo slammed and the car pulled away, making another quick right up an alley and out of sight.

"Pier Forty, Hong Kong," Johnny said. "What an armpit."

He looked up and down the quay. Whatever else might've been there, a ship wasn't. After a moment he walked over to a man who stood leaning against the wall of a warehouse, reading a newspaper by the light of a small caged bulb above the door.

"Say, buddy," Johnny began as he approached the warehouse. "Do you know anything about the *Dragon Wing*...?"

Then he looked at the paper the man was reading. In the center of the front page was the same photo of him yelling at the cameramen that had been on the other tabloid back on the sound stage in Florida. Johnny's Chinese wasn't very good, but it was good enough for him to read the headline: JOHNNY CAGE FAKE.

"Dammit, do I have to see this crap everywhere I go?" he snarled and snatched the paper out of the man's hands.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure of an introduction," the man said, still leaning against the wall.

"Give me a break! I'm Johnny Cage!"

"Don't let 'em get to you," the man said. "It's just as much a lie in Chinese as it is English."

"Sure," Johnny said. He looked at the man for a moment. "Say," he said at last. "Wait a minute. Aren't you Art Lean? I saw you fight in London. You were great."

"Yeah, that's me," the man replied, pushing away from the wall. "And I've seen a couple of your films. You can't fake those moves."

"Tell it to the press."

"Don't let it affect you, man," Art said. "What people say about you doesn't mean a thing. It's who you are that really counts."

"Yeah?" Johnny said. "Well, in my line of work, what people say about you makes all the difference in the world."

He looked over at the pile of suitcases stacked where the limo driver had left them. "Any idea how I can get those aboard the ship when it gets here?"

"You're on your own," Art replied. He took the newspaper back from Johnny and went back to reading it.

Johnny looked around, and spotted a young man in a plain shirt and slacks toting a duffle bag on his shoulder. "Hey, pal! Could you put these things on board when the ship comes in?"

"You want *me* to carry *your* bags?" the young man asked. He looked puzzled.

"Yeah," Johnny said. "I pay money." He pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket. "Money."

He waved the cash under the young man's nose, then pointed to himself. "I pay. You" – he pointed to the young man – "carry" – Johnny pointed to the suitcases – "those."

"You know," the young man said, "you shouldn't wave money around like that down here, Pops."

He leaned closer to Johnny. In a confidential tone he added, "It just isn't *safe*."

Flat against the roof of one the warehouses, two figures watched the scene as Johnny and the young man haggled. The figure on the left lowered his binoculars from his eyes.

"You sure about this, lieutenant?" Jax asked his companion. "Nothing says that creep in the club wasn't lying his ass off. The story about a 'tournament' sounded fishy. Kano could be a thousand miles from here by now."

"No, Jax. I know Kano," Sonya Blade replied. She was still scanning the pier with her light-amplification binoculars. "He's in his element here with all the other wharf rats."

Her binoculars picked up a heavily-muscled man, his head shaved bald, a giant snake tattooed around his left arm vanishing up beneath his short-sleeved shirt. She tracked him as he walked down the quay, stopping to exchange greetings with a woman dressed in a tight green jumpsuit. She had a double row of throwing knives hung like crossed bandoliers across her chest.

"I've never seen such a bunch of criminals and hardcases together in one place before," Sonya said and resumed scanning the waterfront. "Sure as you're alive, something big is happening down here."

"Alive," Jax said. "Just what I was thinking. Sure would be good if you stayed alive. People in my command get killed, I have to write up the reports. And you know how much I hate doing paperwork."

"One day at a time," Sonya said. "All I want is Kano."

A cold, wet breeze came in off the water, stirring Sonya's hair and making her shiver. Down on the pier, the wind stirred the dirt and scraps of paper into dust devils, miniature cyclones that danced evilly among the trash and puddles.

“What the hell is that?” Jax breathed beside her. Sonya followed his glance with her binoculars, and stared.

A fog was blowing in off the ocean – swirling between the pilings and bollards of the pier, wrapping itself around the moving figures of the people on the dock. The mist was thick and white, like a cotton blanket, but with an oddly luminous quality. Sonya imagined that it took the form of writhing human bodies, of open screaming mouths, of staring eyes. It had a smell, too – the smell of rot and corruption.

The wind rose and the fog streamed in from the sea faster and faster, like a white river. And in the midst of the fog came a ship.

In the magnification of her starlight binoculars, Sonya could make out the details of the ship’s construction. This wasn’t any ordinary craft. Built like a typical Chinese junk, it was far larger. Even from her location on the roof of the warehouse, she could hear the crack of the vessel’s rigging, the flapping of its sails.

But that wasn’t the strangest thing about the ship. The junk wasn’t showing any lights. The sails were tattered. Water was pouring from the deck as if the whole ship had just been raised intact from the bottom of the ocean. A tangled mass of seaweed covered the prow, and the hull planking was warped and encrusted with barnacles.

The ship made straight for the pier, even though no sailors were visible on deck, and came to an abrupt halt when it headed the landing.

“There’s a name,” Sonya said. “On the sternboard. I make it *Dragon Wing*”

“I don’t like this, lieutenant,” Jax said. “Not even one little bit. ‘And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: And they were judged every man according to their works...’”

A gangplank thrust across from the deck of the hull, hitting the pier with a dull thud.

Sonya’s hand reached out and squeezed Jax’s arm. “Look there,” she whispered. “About three o’clock. Who do you see?”

A motorcycle was moving down the pier at a walking pace, its engine growling deep and low. It stopped in the shadows beside a warehouse. A big man got off and began to walk toward the ship. He stopped and looked directly up to the place where Sonya and Jax lay concealed. His red, glowing eye shone through the fog.

“Kano!” Sonya said. “That’s him.”

She rose to her knees, pulled out her pistol, jacked a round into the chamber and reholstered it.

“I suppose that if I ordered you not to go down there I’d have to write you up on mutiny charges in the morning,” Jax said.

“Something like that, major.” Sonya moved in a crouch toward the iron ladder leading from the roof down to the street. “I’m bringing him in, dead or alive.”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Jax said. “If Kano’s getting on that ship, then he’s already dead.”

The crime lord was halfway to the water’s edge, just as one of the many who were climbing the gangplank onto the *Dragon Wing*. Sonya paused at the top of the ladder, every muscle of her body taut with frustration.

“Major! He’s getting away!”

Jax made a decision. “Okay, lieutenant, you can try to arrest him. But if you aren’t back in twenty minutes, I’m coming in heavy.”

“Sounds good to me,” Sonya said. She swung one leg onto the latter.

“In the meantime,” Jax said, “try to use some discretion, okay? And if they want to make you pay a silver penny to get on board, don’t go!”

“Sure thing, sir.”

Sonya put her other foot on the rungs. Then she was gone, climbing down into the swirling mist.

Chapter Four

Johnny Cage heard the murmur like a rustle of leaves on the wind: "*Dragon Wing, Dragon Wing, Dragon Wing!*" repeated over and over in dozens of languages, rising from hundreds of throats, as the fog streamed over and around him, too thick to see anything. His own voice added to the swell of sound as he breathed, "The *Dragon Wing*!"

He turned to his pile of luggage, frowning. He managed to get a couple of his suitcases in hand a couple more clamped under his arms, the ones with the more important parts of his wardrobe and personal gear, but he had to leave two or three of his pieces of matched luggage behind. He wasn't used to carrying his own gear anymore, not since he had been a young fighter heading to Hollywood with a knapsack on his back and big ideas in his head. He'd been lucky, he knew that, but he was talented, too.

Cage moved slowly along with the crowd to the landing where the gangplank lay on the pier, weighed down by his equipage. The gangplank was slippery underfoot. Once his hand brushed the manrope at its side and his skin crawled; the rope was wet and slimy to the touch.

The fog had concealed the true size of the vessel. It was huge. The crowd from the dock thinned out and dispersed aboard it, leaving Johnny alone as he struggled aft with his heavy cases. Mist swirled around him. He almost tripped over a young man unrolling a pad on the deck.

"Hey," Johnny said, recognizing him. "You! I lost some of my luggage because of you."

"My name isn't 'you,'" the young man said. "It's Liu. And I'm not your porter or anyone else's."

"You know who I am?" Johnny demanded. "I'm–"

The breath was knocked out of him and he was sent sprawling on the slippery deck by a sudden blow from behind. He rolled to his feet and lunged up to catch the shoulder of the person who'd just smacked into him.

"You want to play rough, asshole?" he demanded as he spun her around.

He found himself staring down the barrel of a nine-millimeter pistol held in a two-handed combat grip by a young woman wearing a dark-blue uniform. Her lips were red and her hair was as yellow as gold. In the pale phosphorescent light her skin appeared dead white.

"No, not interested in playing," she said. "Are you?"

“Oh,” Johnny said. The muzzle of the pistol looked like it was about a yard across. “No need for that. I’m Johnny Cage. You know, the movie star. And you are...?”

The woman ignored his introduction. “Have you seen a big man, one glowing red eye, come this way?”

She was pretty – or she would be if she’d just smile – but her question made no sense at all to Johnny.

“Who? No, I haven’t.”

The ship shuddered slightly under his feet, and the wind stirred his hair as it veered.

“Then get out of my way, asshole.” She lowered the pistol, still holding it in two hands, and walked off farther aft, moving gracefully.

“Who the hell was that?” Johnny asked, brushing muck from the deck off his tailored jacket the best he could.

“Looked like just another one of your star-struck fans to me,” Liu said, grinning.

Sonya Blade continued aft, stepping carefully. She was certain that Kano had headed this way, and she was going to find him. The dark opening of a companionway loomed out of the fog ahead. Nothing for it but to try. She went down the dark ladder one step at a time, making sure of her footing all the way.

A slight rolling of the deck told her that the ship was probably underway. Well, that wouldn’t stop her, not while there was still a mission to perform. At the foot of the ladder she came to a passageway, leading forward. She paused for a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the deeper gloom. Pale green light illuminated it enough to make out the deck and the bulkheads on either side. Pistol held before her, she made her way carefully along the passageway. The passageway ended, opening out into a hold, its farther recesses lost in shadow. Sonya continued forward, her eyes scanning constantly.

The hold ended with a bulkhead running athwartship, its smooth surface broken only by a single wooden door. Sonya approached the door carefully. She had a dreadful feeling that she was being followed, that the creaking she heard wasn’t just the planks of the ship reacting to the

forces of wind and water, but something sneaking up behind her. Just as she was about to spin around to see what might be there, the door opened before her, its hinges moving silently.

A man stepped out of the lighted doorway and into the hold. She brought up her pistol to bear on him. His face looked surprisingly young for the air of command he assumed. He wore the richly embroidered silk robes of a mandarin.

"Sonya Blade," he said, his voice deep and steady. "It's an honor finally to meet you. I am Shang Tsung."

He bowed low before her, then rose again, never losing eye contact. His eyes were strange. They seemed to glow. To glow red, like Kano's eye. Kano.

"You're not who I'm looking for," Sonya said. "I'm a federal officer under the United Nations' command, in pursuit of a dangerous international criminal. I'll have to ask you to step aside."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Shang said, his voice tinged with sadness.

"Yes you can," Sonya replied. "I've got an arrest warrant for a drug and arms dealer named Kano, and if you give me any grief I'll take you in, too, on a charge of aiding and abetting. He's a murderer, and I want him."

"Very impressive, my dear," Shang said. "But this is my ship. If you want a tour you'll have to ask me. Nicely."

"Hey, don't give the lady a hard time," came a sudden voice from behind her. "She's just doing her job."

Sonya glanced back over her shoulder. It was the movie star, standing there with a dopey grin plastered all over his face, and the little Chinese guy behind him.

"When I want backup, I'll *radio* for it," she hissed. "Just what I needed. More civilians to get in the way. Now take a hike."

She turned her head forward again, just in time. Two men dressed in black robes – one with a blue overmantle and one with yellow, both with full-head masks also in black – came sliding from the shadows that gathered where the subdued lighting of the hold didn't extend. She recognized the garb: ninjas, the secret master assassins of feudal Japan. One of the ninjas stood in front of the little group, the other behind them.

“You got that radio handy?” Johnny whispered.

Sonya lifted her weapon and pointed it at the figure who stood before her. Deep blue light seemed to pulse around the ninja’s hands.

“Move aside,” she commanded.

By way of response, the ninja reached out, incredibly fast, and touched the muzzle of her pistol. Through her gloves Sonya could feel the gun freeze in her hands, the cold so deep that it was painful. Ice crystals glittered in the air around her weapon. Then the ninja took hold of the slide and twisted. The pistol snapped in his hand. The slide, the barrel, the receiver – everything forward of the trigger guard broke in a crystallized line.

Sonya threw the useless hunk of metal which remained to her at the ninja’s head and dropped back into a fighting crouch.

“Whew-ee!” the young Chinese man behind her said. “Trick or treat!”

Johnny Cage, meanwhile, had problems of his own. When one of the ninjas stepped behind the little group, Johnny had turned to face the yellow-mantled newcomer. *This isn’t a stuntman,* Johnny reminded himself. *No need to pull the punches. Go as hard and fast as I can – I may not get a second chance.*

To his surprise, though, the ninja didn’t attack. At least he didn’t attack with any of the classic combinations of hand, foot, and body which Johnny had studied and trained against. Instead, the ninja held up his right hand, palm out.

The skin on the ninja’s palm split open into a long, bloodless gash from top to bottom. And out of the unnatural wound a creature emerged. It began in the shape of a spike, then elongated, grew, and took on a sinuous life of its own. Then its jaws snapped open, revealing rows of pointed teeth, dripping with venom. A long, forked tongue flickered out and then slid back between its jaws.

The creature waved in the air like a cobra seeking its prey. Then it stiffened, locked on Johnny’s position, and began to advance toward him.

“Holy crap,” Johnny whispered in amazement. “Last time I fought something like this the special effects guys added it in postproduction!”

Liu still faced forward. He looked at the last man, the one who wore embroidered Chinese robes and who had called up the two ninjas out of the darkness. Liu recognized the man.

"You!" he exclaimed. The eyes were the same. They were the eyes from his dream. "Sorcerer, I know you!"

He lunged forward toward the older man.

In the blink of an eye Shang Tsung changed form, his body shifting into the appearance of a man in a samurai's armor, sword raised over his head.

At the same moment an enormous ball of blue, crackling fire swept down through the hold. Electric discharges flew from the ball, and its light showed the little group in startling detail. Sonya and Johnny stood back to back, each in a defensive stance, their form perfect. Their ninja opponents stood facing them, also in stance. Any icy fog lay about the feet of the ninja facing Sonya, while a serpent protruded from the hand of the ninja opposite Johnny.

The ball of blue lightning came smashing through the group. The two ninjas were tossed aside like bowling pins. They rolled, and were lost in the darkness, their black uniforms blending with the shadows. Johnny and Sonya remained standing, but a blue arc discharge played over their clothing. Sparks shot from the buckles on Sonya's web gear. Miniature coronas played around Johnny's fingers.

The blue ball stopped between Liu and the samurai. There it coalesced, changing as it did so into the shape of a frail old beggar man, coolie hat on his head, leaning on a wooden staff. For a moment the old man's eyes glowed brightly with the blue electric light before they too faded.

At the same time the samurai changed back into the shape of the mandarin. They stood in contrast to one another, rags against silken finery, each regarding the man before him. It was the beggar with the staff who spoke first.

"Enough!" he said, his voice rolling like the thunder in the bills.

"You!" Liu exclaimed.

"Ah, Lord Rayden," Shang Tsung said, smoothly. "How good of you to grace us with your presence."

“Your sideshow freaks attracted my attention when they tried to attack my fighters,” Rayden said, his voice harsh and commanding. “That is expressly forbidden before the tournament begins, as both you and the emperor know well.”

Shang made a mocking half-bow to Rayden. “My apologies, my lord. It won’t happen again.”

“I shall see to that,” Rayden replied.

“Of course you will,” Shang said. “Until we reach the island. You have no dominion there.”

“My domains are well known to me, sorcerer,” Rayden said. “See that you stick to yours.”

By way of answer Shang bowed again, then turned to go back through the doorway from which he had emerged.

“Not so fast,” Sonya said, stepping forward and reaching out to grab his wrist. “What’s this about a tournament?”

“Ah, my child,” Shang said, plucking up her hand and removing it from his sleeve. “You have been chosen, Sonya. Much to my delight.”

He bowed again to the little group, then walked through the door.

Liu stood gazing at the beggar in a state of awe. “You really are him!”

“Who else should I be?” Rayden asked. Without pausing for answer, his body began to glow with blue electric light. It collapsed again into the ball of lightning.

“Come with me!” his voice commanded in tones of thunder. Then, without warning, the ball of lightning vanished, leaving a smell of ozone in its wake.

Johnny reached out his hand and waved it through where the ball of light had been.

“‘Come with me,’” he muttered. “Easy for *him* to say.”

Sonya whirled toward Liu. “Okay, talk,” she said. “Who is that guy? And who are you?”

“Who I am is the easy question,” Liu said. “My name is Liu Kang, and I’m the hereditary defender of the Order of Light.”

“That certainly makes everything clear,” Johnny said. “I’m along on this trip because it’s supposed to be good for my career. Why are you here?”

“I... I lost my faith,” Liu said.

“This is getting ridiculous fast,” Sonya said. “While you guys are playing Old Home Week, I have a job to do.”

She turned to go back forward. Instead of the door, however, the bulkhead was blank. She pounded on it with her fist. The echo was solid.

“Son of a bitch!” she swore in frustration.

“I bet that’s what your little boy calls himself all the time,” Johnny muttered. If she heard him, she didn’t react.

“I should have been defending the temple of Rayden,” Liu said. “Instead, I left my brother behind to take my place, and went to America.”

An uncomfortable silence followed, broken at last by Sonya. “Are you guys going to help me or just get in my way?”

“Might as well help,” Johnny said, glad of the change of topic. “Won’t be the first time I went with a pretty girl.”

Sonya’s lip twisted. “You know what the initials MCP stand for?”

“I have something else to do,” Liu said. “My brother died because I lost my faith.”

“My commanding officer, Major Briggs, would have something to say to you about blessed are they who have not seen but yet believe,” Sonya said. “I’m heading aft. You want to come?”

Liu shrugged. “When my god appears and says, ‘follow me,’ I don’t have a choice. I must follow him.”

“Maybe we’d do best by doing both,” Johnny said. “Stick together. Follow this Lord Rayden character, and look for this other dude, this – what was his name?”

“Kano,” Sonya said.

"Yeah, Kano – at the same time. I think that splitting our forces would be a bad idea."

"Okay," Liu said. "We team up."

"Everybody's a tactician," Sonya said with resignation. "Right, then. We're going topside. When we get there, we're going to start searching the ship. We'll find Rayden, we'll find Rayden, we'll find Kano, and we'll find a way off of this floating dump. Assuming, of course, that the passageway is still there."

She stalked past them, heading aft.

"Charming girl," Johnny muttered, and turned to follow.

He kept his eyes moving right and left, watching the shadows. What he saw didn't make him feel any better. Apparently the cargo of the *Dragon Wing* consisted entirely of human bones, baled and stacked in the hold from deck to overhead. And if that wasn't enough, the memory of the snake-headed thing emerging from the ninja's palm made him wish he had eyes on the back of his head.

The walk must have taken only a few minutes at most, but to Johnny it seemed like hours. The passageway was still there, but having walls on either side didn't make him feel any better – it made him feel trapped. The three of them went up the ladder to the main deck, Sonya in the lead.

Once on deck, they stopped.

"Let's talk this out," Johnny said. He wasn't feeling as trapped any more. "What's our situation?"

"Underway, making way, out of sight of land," Sonya said, scanning the horizon with her binoculars.

"No, I mean, I want to know how did that guy in the blue ball appear and vanish like that?"

"Think it through," Sonya said. "There's a rational explanation for everything."

"He is Rayden," Liu said. "God of Lightning and Protector of the Realm of Earth. Though I didn't believe it until just a minute ago."

"That sure is a real rational explanation," Johnny said.

A pinpoint of light appeared before him. In an instant it expanded to a ball of electricity, then in a thunderclap that left Johnny's ears ringing, it changed to Lord Rayden.

"You seek answers," Rayden said, his voice reverberating like thunder. "Listen, and understand."

Rayden turned his eyes on each of the three, one after the other. "The time for hesitation is past," he said. "The time for petty quarrels is past. What you are about to face is vastly more important than" – he pointed to Johnny – "your ego!"

He pointed to Sonya. "Your enemy!"

He pointed to Liu. "Your doubts!"

Rayden paused, while electric arcs sprang from his body to the deck and his eyes glowed with the uncanny blue light.

"You have embarked on a sacred mission," he said more quietly. "You have been chosen to defend the Realm of Earth in the tournament called Mortal Kombat!"

Chapter Five

With a rush of wind, the fog broke apart into scattered wisps. Then it was gone entirely.

Jax looked at his watch. Only ten minutes had elapsed. He looked over the parapet of the warehouse roof. The pier was empty. The crowd of people was gone, as was the ship. And so was Lieutenant Blade.

He keyed the handset on his radio. “Cardinal, this is Black Hawk. Radio check. Over.”

No reply came from the radio.

“I’m sure not looking forward to writing the report on this one,” Jax muttered. He keyed the handset again, and began passing orders.

“Defend the earth?” Sonya asked. “Defend it from what?” She stood in front of Rayden, hands on hips, a defiant look on her face.

“Better you ask from whom,” Rayden said. “Your ‘Earth’ is but one of many parallel realms. One of them is a forsaken land called Outworld, ruled by an immortal who has crowned himself emperor. Over the centuries he has squeezed the good out of that unhappy place just as a man squeezes an orange. Now he seeks new worlds to conquer and new peoples to enslave.”

“If he’s so powerful,” Johnny said, “then why doesn’t he just invade us and get it over with?”

“To enter the Realm of Earth,” Rayden replied, “the emperor’s demon sorcerer Shang Tsung and his warriors must win ten straight victories in Mortal Kombat, against ten generations of the earth’s best fighters.”

The God of Lightning looked at each of the three as if appraising them before he continued.

“The tournaments have continued for five centuries. In that time the forces of the emperor have won nine victories. This will be the tenth – and final – tournament.”

Sonya looked at him with a challenging expression. “A handful of people in a leaky boat are going to save the world?”

“Exactly. The essence of Mortal Kombat isn’t death, but life. Mortal men and women must defend their own world.”

“I saw a lot of people boarding this ship,” Liu said. “Why are you telling this to us? What about them?”

“They are all superb fighters,” Rayden replied patiently, “but I have looked into their souls and futures – and into yours. You three will decide the outcome of the tournament. The fate of billions of people will depend upon you.”

“Good thing there’s no pressure here,” Johnny commented under his breath.

“But what about Shang Tsung?” Liu continued. “I saw him on board this ship, too. The demon sorcerer has a debt to pay to my family – and to me.”

“Are you still concerned with vengeance?” Rayden asked. “If you were to challenge Shang Tsung now, you would lose. You would lose both your life and your soul, and the Realm of Earth would be lost with you.”

The breeze freshened, stirring Rayden’s ragged clothing. The sails overheard snapped and strained with the win.

“He must pay for my brother’s death,” Liu insisted.

“You are not ready!”

The wind rose higher, until it was howling through the rigging with a ghostly wail. The ship heeled over sharply beneath the assault of the elements. Spray torn from the crests of waves hit Sonya on the face, salty and warm like blood.

“Look above you,” Rayden cried, his voice overmatching the wind. “It has begun!”

The sky burst into a roiling mass of color as the clouds tore apart. Streamers of light flashed above the mast-tops. The *Dragon Wing* pitched and rolled in the wild seas, while curtains of light in violet and red pulsed across the sky.

Johnny thought he could see pictures in the beams and rays of light: armies meeting in battle, swords rising and falling, men screaming in silent agony.

The pulsing colors grew more vivid. Liu saw the faces of beautiful women among the unearthly shapes above and saw those faces decay to reveal the grinning skulls beneath. He shut his eyes to hold out the horror.

Green and yellow traceries shot through the sky as the waves grew mountainous. The ship rose and fell, lifting on the crests, sliding into troughs, lurching with the motion. With a sound like thunder one of the sails gave way, tearing itself to shreds, the pieces whipped away into darkness.

As she looked at the blazing sky Sonya saw a spreading pool of blood, and in it she saw Lieutenant van Hoven lying in the alley. As she watched he arose, his severed throat spurting blood, and looked at her. Then he melted, changing before her eyes into the shape of Kano.

"I'll get you!" Sonya shouted at the phantasm, high above her in the sky.

But the vision had not finished changing. It still floated and flowed, Kano's form changing again into the shape of Shang Tsung, the sorcerer.

Sonya drew her eyes away. And there, high up in the rigging, a black shape against the blazing sky, she saw Shang Tsung himself. The wind streamed in his hair, his garments flowed around him in the win.

He lifted his arms to the sky. "Ha!" he cried. "It has begun!"

Pier Forty in Hong Kong was lit as bright as day by batteries of lamps mounted on trucks. The deep throb of a diesel generator mounted on the back of a deuce-and-a-half provided the power for the searchlights.

Jax stood on the pier, hands on his haps, watching as a squad of soldiers walked down the length of the dark stone quay, shoulder-width apart, scanning the ground in front of them. One of the soldiers stopped and raised his hand. The rest of the line stopped with him. Jax trotted over.

"What do you have, corporal?"

The trooper pointed. An amulet, perhaps three inches across, lay in the mud. The amulet's top was clean; it hadn't been there long.

“Good work,” Jax said, and bent to pick it up. The amulet was a circle of fired clay, open in the center, with the figure of a dragon writhing inside the open ring. It looked old.

“I wonder what this could be?” Jax mused, fingering the object, turning it over front and back. He called over the radio operator.

“Get in touch with HQ,” he said. “Have them coordinate with the Hong Kong police. Someone must have noticed a major concentration of plug-uglies over the last few days. I’d like a list of unsolved deaths for the past week. And I’d like the name of the number-one expert on the symbols used by various tournaments. Especially,” he turned the amulet over again, “the ones who use dragons.”

The wind had died. The sea was calm and unruffled, a silver mirror that stretched out to the horizon. *Dragon Wing* lay at anchor in a calm bay under a tropical blue sky. The ship’s sails hung limp from the yards. Its keel was steady in the ocean.

Longboats were pulling away from the *Dragon Wing* and heading for the white sand beach of a tropical island. Each boat held half a dozen fighters destined to try their strength and skill in the tournament.

Liu Kang sat near the bow of one boat, looking at the approaching island. Above the beach, tall basalt cliffs rose high into the air. They towered what seemed to be thousands of feet straight up into a thick layer of cloud that hovered around the place. Higher still, the basalt spire emerged again from the clouds. The summit was covered with lush green vegetation and held the ruins of an ancient temple. The white marble of the temple gleamed in the first rays of dawn.

Liu saw what appeared to be a stairway carved into the cliff. The fighters who had already landed were heading to it, and more were on the stairs, their clothing forming moving spots of color up the face of the cliff until they were lost in the distance and the clouds.

Farther back in the boat Johnny sat on his four remaining pieces of luggage. He stared mostly at the toes of his hand-made shoes. He wasn’t feeling particularly perky. This trip wasn’t turning out anything like what he’d expected, and he wasn’t enjoying it much.

Sonya sat beside Johnny. She had taken her uplink phone from her pack, deployed its miniature satellite dish, and was trying to raise her base.

“Black Hawk, this is Cardinal, radio check, over,” Sonya said, speaking slowly and distinctly. She paused, listening, then tried again. “Black Hawk, this is Cardinal, radio check, over.” A longer pause, listening, brought nothing, not even the warbling whine of a carrier wave. “Black Hawk, this is Cardinal, nothing heard, out.”

She flipped a switch on the side of the phone and tried again. “Black Hawk, this is Cardinal–”

“Hey, babe, while you’re at it, see if you can get my agent on the phone,” Johnny said.

Sonya didn’t bother looking over at him. “Do I look like your secretary?”

“It was a joke.”

“So are you,” Sonya said. She twisted a dial on the side of the phone. “What’s the matter?” she said a moment later. “No snappy comeback when you don’t have a script?”

The boat beached, its keel crunching against the sand. Sonya put one hand on the gunwale and jumped over the side, landing in knee-deep water. She waded ashore, not bothering to look back. Once on the dry sand she tried the uplink phone again.

“Any station this net, any station this net, this is Cardinal. I transmit in the blind, I transmit in the clear. Request you relay to Black Hawk, Cardinal requires dustoff. I say again Cardinal requires dustoff. Out.”

“What are you doing?” Liu asked, coming up beside her over the soft sand, his duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

“Trying to contact the good guys,” Sonya said, eyeing the phone critically. “Not having much luck, though. My guess is your pal fried all the microchips when he did his ball-of-lightning routine last night.”

“Your radio is fine,” Liu said. “Look at your compass.”

“Okay.”

Sonya flipped up the cover on her wrist compass. The needle was swinging with a jerky motion, fixing first in one direction, then in another.

“Where the hell am I?” Sonya said, quietly, as the compass pointed toward the rising sun.

“Who do I look like, your travel agent?” Johnny said, walking up behind the two others.

Sonya gave him a withering glare, then stalked off, not saying a word. Liu remained behind with Johnny.

“All right,” Johnny said at last. “I give up. What’s going on?”

“What if,” Liu began, picking his words carefully, “all the legends were true?”

“What legends would those be?” Johnny asked. Somehow, though, he was afraid that he might not like the answer.

Meanwhile Sonya had spotted a man wearing a hooded robe of coarse brown material, belted around the waist with a white knotted rope. He was standing on the beach, watching the boats arrive with their passengers, making marks with a stylus on a long parchment scroll that he carried.

Sonya fell in beside the monk as he paced the beach, meeting each boat as it arrived.

“Say,” Sonya began, “can you tell me if there’s a telephone exchange on the island? A police station? A naval base?”

The monk didn’t reply or even seem to notice her.

“Listen,” Sonya said, in a more impatient tone. “I’m Lieutenant Blade, on special assignment–”

The monk stopped walking, unrolled his scroll a little way, found a name and put a line through it.

“Wait a minute!” Sonya said. “That’s *my* name! What’s my name doing on your list?”

The monk didn’t reply, but began walking again toward another group just landed from the boats.

“Wait up!” Sonya said, taking the monk by his sleeve. His cowl fell away from his face as he turned toward her. She could see that his lips had been sewn shut with rawhide laces, now overgrown with scar tissue. She dropped his arm. The monk turned away, adjusted his hood, and continued on his former path.

“You know, that’s taking the old vow-of-silence thing a little too seriously,” Johnny said. He and Liu had come up the beach to join Sonya. “Learn anything useful?”

“That we may be in deeper kimchee than I thought,” Sonya said. “Anyone have any suggestions?”

“Well,” Johnny said, “if this setup is anything like Club Med, I’d say that the bar was somewhere that way.” He gestured with his chin in the direction of the stairway carved from the living stone up the side of the cliff.

“Gonna hire someone to carry those for you?” Liu asked, pointing at the four suitcases Johnny had left lying on the sand.

“Would you like to...?” Johnny began. He glanced at Liu. “Nah, didn’t think so.”

He went back to the pile of luggage and began to gather it into his arms.

Art Lean looked over at the side of the ship at the tropical island glittering in the morning sunlight. He hadn’t believed that the myths about the tournament were real, not until the uncanny junk had sailed into Hong Kong harbor. Even now he found it hard to accept that he was going to fight the greatest warriors of the world, freestyle, for a “prize beyond wealth or measure,” as the scroll had put it.

Art glanced at his watch, then shook it. It had stopped just a few minutes past three in the morning. About the time the light show in the sky had started.

“Shockproof, waterproof, anti-magnetic,” Art muttered, shaking the thing again. “The people at Rolex are gonna *hear* about this when I get back Stateside.”

Rope ladders led from the rails of the junk down to the water’s edge, where a succession of longboats was arriving empty and departing full of the men and women who had waited with him on the pier the night before.

They were boarding the boats in an orderly manner. Very few of them were speaking to one another. Art supposed that they were as much in shock over the events of the last twelve hours and in awe of their surroundings as he was. His newfound shipmates were a very mixed bunch, ranging from a group of five high-school kids to a debonair man in a black tuxedo. He recognized a couple of the people on deck from seeing them on the sport-karate circuit, though

none of his close friends or rivals were along on this trip that he could see. One man whom he saw at a distance was most likely a well-known football player. Most of the people on the *Dragon Wing* looked very, very tough.

Well, Art thought, *anyone looking at me from out front would think I was tough, too.* He put on his meanest scowl and went looking for a longboat.

The ride to the beach went quickly. Four strong oarsmen pulled on the sweeps to make the boat fly over the water. When the boat grounded, Art went ashore with his new companions. No one was talking much yet, but Art had developed the habit of watching people and sizing them up, making something of their way of holding themselves, the way they looked at others.

Most of the people he saw in this crowd he pegged as being overconfident, too sure of their own prowess. They'd each spent their lives, by the look of it, being the toughest man – or woman – in whichever local barroom they hung out in.

Art saw that the fighters were walking toward the cliff, and soon enough he saw that what had appeared to be a natural crack in the black stone was really a cunningly-wrought stairway leading upward. Art started toward it and began to go up.

At first the stairway led back toward the cliff in a majestic curve, the treads easy to climb. But soon the stairs took a sharp twist to the right while the treads grew narrower and steeper.

The stairway climbed steadily along, hugging the side of the cliff. Art noticed that the individual steps were carved out of the rock of the cliff itself, rather than being cut and assembled from dressed stones.

I wonder how long it took to carve this, he thought idly as he continued to climb. The stairway made a hairpin turn to the left in a switchback and became even steeper. Art was in superb physical shape, but even he began to feel the burn of the continued physical exertion. It was like being trapped for hours on the stair-stepper machine at a health club, with the setting turned to maximum.

Art detached his mind and let it float while his body continued its regular motion. He admired the purity of the air, the warmth of the sun on his back, the delicate differences in the color of the natural stone in the stairs and the cliff. From ahead and behind he could hear the echo of footsteps slapping the rock, but the tight switchbacks kept him from looking far enough ahead to see the person who preceded him up the mountain. The stairway had grown so narrow that two

could pass only if both turned sideways and slid past one another. No one passed Art as he climbed, but more than once he passed other fighters sitting downcast and gasping.

Art entered a misty region and knew that he had come to the layer of clouds that surrounded the spike of rock. He supposed that he had climbed about two thousand vertical feet by now. Delicate lichens grew on the cliff here, and the steps were slippery with moss. The stairway didn't have a railing on the outer side. Art edged closer to the cliff. It would be a pity to slip now after having come so far.

The rock face here was different. The dark basalt did not appear to be carved, but odd traceries and patters appeared in the wet stone of the cliff, sometimes looking like animals and in other places looking like the faces of men.

After a while more the mist thinned, and Art could see the tops of the clouds beneath him, blindingly white in the sun. Beyond the clouds he could see the deep blue of the sky ending with a sharp horizon line where it met the deeper blue of the sea. He began to calculate the effects that high altitude would have on fighting in a tournament. Suppose the top of the island was five thousand feet above sea level. That would be the equivalent of a tournament held in Denver or Mexico City.

Art had fought in both of those places, and knew how to adjust his breathing to the thinner air. He smiled a little; he might have a tiny advantage over those fighters who hadn't had his experience.

The stairway grew even steeper. At the point where Art was convinced that he'd have to start using his hands as well as his feet to climb, it ended. He emerged onto the top of the plateau. Art saw the top of a building ahead of him, its roof glistening gold. A shimmering gong sounded from that direction.

Art turned to follow the sound.

"I surely hope someone is going to explain things to me," he muttered as he walked across the grass toward the pavilion. "Right now this is all too weird for words."

The lights were dim red in the communications van. A knock sounded on the door.

"Major, Mr. Chu is here," a private said, sticking her head into the van.

“Mr. Chu?”

“The expert on tournaments,” the soldier said.

“Let’s see what Mr. Chu has to say about this,” Jax said.

He fingered the dragon emblem, and left the van.

Several hours after he began, Johnny reached the top of the stairs. His lungs felt like fire and his legs were starting to cramp up. His four pieces of luggage had become only one small case, the others abandoned along the way. Sweat was pouring down his face, running into his eyes in stinging streams he was too weary to wipe away.

When he saw something besides more steps in front of his eyes, he could hardly believe his good fortune. The stairway ended in a pleasant garden, full of bright flowers blooming amid statues of fighters, life-sized and carved of stone, each one standing on a tall pedestal.

Liu and Sonya were waiting there for him, sitting on a low stone wall. Liu was looking winded and weary, but Sonya looked like she was still ready to run a four-minute mile. Johnny went to join them, leaning casually against the nearest pedestal and trying not to appear too winded.

“I know what the first bout in this tournament is,” he said as soon as he got his breath back. “Anyone who makes it all the way to the top without having a heart attack gets to move on to the second round.”

“And the second bout is surviving dinner,” Liu said. He pointed to a huge, gold-roofed hall visible beyond the trees. “The legends say that the next step is something called the Feast of Heroes.”

“Just what I wanted,” Johnny said. “A full platter of submarine sandwiches.”

“I can handle it,” Sonya said. “I’ve had combat experience with food. I ate the chow at Fort Benning and lived to tell the tale.”

“I suppose so,” Liu said. “But from now on we have to be on our guard, and whatever happens, show no surprise.”

“In the course of my misspent life I’ve seen a lot of things,” Johnny said. “There isn’t a whole lot left that could surprise me.”

“Oh, really?” Liu said. “Then look at these statues.”

“What about them? They’re statues.”

“In the legends, they’re supposed to be the great and ancient warriors from all the previous Mortal Kombats.”

“Wait a minute,” Johnny said. He pointed at one of the statues, a figure holding a curved sword. The statue’s head resembled a giant grasshopper, and its legs bend the wrong way at the knees. “You’re saying that all these are meant to be *realistic* statues?”

“Yeah,” Liu said. “Not all of our opponents are going to be human.”

“Like those two dudes in the hold last night?”

“Worse.”

“You’re only saying that to cheer me up,” Johnny muttered.

Sonya looked at them both exasperation. “Here I am listening to both of you and nodding like you’re making sense,” she said. “Well, I’m not here to fight in any tournament. I’m here to find Kano.”

“If that’s who you seek, I’m sure you’ll find him,” Liu said. “The legends...”

“Oh, bugger your legends,”

“That guy Rayden,” Johnny began, “he made a pretty good case that all of us have to fight in Mortal Kombat.”

“I’ll fight if I have to,” Sonya said. “I’ve never backed down from a challenge yet. But don’t forget what my main mission is. Once I find Kano, I’m going to put him under arrest and then it’s *adiós, muchachos.*”

They walked on in silence a little way father, heading in the direction of the grand hall. The flowers smelled sweet. The explosion of greenery looked like it kept an army of gardeners employed full-time.

They turned a corner in the path. “Whoo-ee,” Johnny said. “Check this out.”

A woman was standing there under the shadow of a warrior’s statue. She had an exotic look to her, with her tilted eyebrows and delicate coloring. Her body was perfectly proportioned, and covered only with layers of the thinnest translucent silks. Four ladies-in-waiting surrounded her, each as pretty as the next.

As the three companions walked by, the woman raised her eyes and looked straight at them, her gaze catching Liu and holding him as he passed.

“When a woman looks at you like that it means something,” Johnny said after they’d gone by.

“Yeah,” Sonya said. “It means she’s a bimbo.”

“Hey, check this one out,” Johnny said, pointing to a statue as they passed by. On top of its pedestal stood a representation of another alien fighter. It was humanoid, with a gargoyle’s head. The stone was worn smooth with the wind and rain of centuries.

“Old Chinese proverb,” Liu said. “Never fight an ugly man. He has nothing to lose.”

The other two laughed. Together they walked on toward the Great Hall.

Chapter Six

Mr. Chu was a small Asian man, very old, dressed in a rumpled blue suit. He stood and bowed when Jax entered the command post. Jax returned the bow with a nod and indicated a seat.

"I'm told that you know something about the tournaments of Hong Kong," Jax began, "and something about their symbols."

He pulled the dragon's-head token out of his pocket and laid it on the table in front of Chu.

"What can you tell me about this?"

Mr. Chu's face suddenly grew very pale, and he seemed even older than before.

"This..." he said. "This, I cannot tell you. There are only legends. And they are not mine to tell."

"Well, whose are they?" Jax's voice was quiet, but he had raised himself to his feet and was leaning on the table, looming over Mr. Chu. "One of my team is in trouble, and I think this–" he gestured at the dragon in its circle – "is involved."

"If this is involved, honored sir," Mr. Chu said, looking at the clay amulet, "more than your team is in trouble. If you wish answers, I suggest you go to the Temple of the Order of Light. Perhaps they will speak with you."

No sooner had the three companions gone out of sight through the trees than Shang Tsung stepped out from behind the pedestal of the gargoyle statue.

The demon sorcerer looked back in the direction from which the three had come. The woman in silks with her four ladies-in-waiting stood in the open under a tree. She appeared to be examining the fighters who had arrived on board the *Dragon Wing* as they walked past.

"The Princess Kitana," Shang said, though who he was addressing wasn't at once apparent. "She is the emperor's ward. I don't trust her. Although, or perhaps because, she is a child of Outworld, she is our most dangerous adversary in the fight against the champions of Earth."

He paused, looking at the princess and her four maids.

“Watch her carefully, Reptile,” Shang said at last. “She must not make contact with Rayden’s chosen three. Especially the most dangerous of our adversaries, Liu Kang.”

After watching the princess for a moment more, he turned and strode away, his embroidered robes swishing with his gait, in the direction of the Great Hall.

The weathered gargoyle statue opened its eyelids to reveal a pair of pale green eyes. Reptile fixed its unblinking gaze on Shang until the sorcerer, too, was lost from sight, then swiftly clambered down from the pedestal. A scowl flashed across its hideous face, before it ran off, with a hip-swinging motion, deep into the statuary garden.

The sound of drums beating in a deep rhythm swept over the garden. The sound was heartbeat-paced, the tone low. It made the air vibrate, the sound penetrating the bones of its listeners, as if the heart of the world was audible. Those fighters who had not yet passed through the garden picked up their pace and headed toward the place whence the sound originated: the Great Hall.

Among those entering the Great Hall were Johnny, Liu, and Sonya. When they arrived, they found it to be already filled with people – and other creatures – of all descriptions. A busty woman with long brown hair stood near the door. She carried wooden darts, each painted with red enamel, their red points of another material. The darts were arranged in sheaths fitted to her forearms. Near her stood a taller man, with claws on the tips of his fingers. When he smiled, he revealed sharp fangs pointed like a cat’s. The sound of the drums was overlaid by a babble of voices speaking in every imaginable language.

“This place is bigger than a football stadium,” Johnny said, looking around him as he entered. The crowd pressed him in on every side. Thick, spicy smoke clouded the air.

Sonya nodded. “I make it about two hundred meters from here to the back wall. Maybe a couple of thousand people.”

Open beams braced the roof high above their heads. From each beam hung a huge silk banner marked with the sigil of the dragon’s head in the open circle. Beneath the roof beams long balconies supported by carved stone pillars ran along either side of the hall. Musicians filled the balconies, playing drums and flutes in a weird, discordant sound.

The sound of the flute made Johnny’s pulse race, at the same time as it filled him with misgivings. “Just based on the background music,” he whispered, “I’d say we’re in trouble.”

“Gee, I’d already figured that out, bright boy,” Sonya whispered back as they walked, together with Liu Kang, down the middle of the hall.

Beneath the balconies, the walls were all made of carved stone lacework. Torches stood out from the walls and lamps hung from the ceiling beams or stood on iron stands, filling the shadowy interior with flickering light and shifting shapes.

The uncertain lighting kept Liu Kang from noticing at first that the non-human and grotesque figures from the garden of statues were represented here in the flesh. Then he realized that nor far away from him stood a being with the head of an eagle, the body of a lion, and a tail like a snake.

“I hadn’t believed the legends,” he muttered, “not even when I was telling the others about them...”

Johnny Cage seemed unimpressed by the strange creatures that moved among the banquet guests. He swept out his hand to show the ranks of tables along the sides of the hall. “What do you think, do we sit with the friends of the bride or the friends of the groom?”

“Looks like most of the people are over on the left side,” Sonya said. “Most of the humans, anyway.”

Up against the far end of the hall, as far from the entrance as it was possible to get, stood a dais. Dark archways opened in the walls to either side of the raised platform. On the dais were high tables covered with silk cloths, and silk banners covered the wall behind it.

The champions in the hall began to take places on the benches that stood beside the long tables.

“I don’t see anything that looks like a maitre d’ around here,” Johnny said, “so I guess we’ll have to seat ourselves.”

To the wailing sound of the flutes a procession of silk-clad ladies entered the hall from one side, arranging themselves along the left side of the dais. The ladies were dressed in silks in all the colors of the rainbow. The cloth shimmered in the light, made alluring by the motion of the bodies beneath it.

At last, behind the ladies, her silken train borne by her four maids, came Princess Kitana. She wore scarlet silks stitched all around with a golden thread. For a moment she stood behind the high seat on the dais, her eyes searching the hall. She swept the ranks of champions in the hall

with her gaze and found Liu. She looked deeply into his eyes. Then she broke the contact and sat, and her ladies-in-waiting sat with her.

“Half the table up there is empty,” Liu said. “I wonder who else is coming up to the party?”

“I don’t know, but I think it’s time to find places of our own,” said Sonya.

Johnny pointed. “Looks like there’s room over that way.”

The three took seats on benches at one of the long tables on the left side of the hall, Johnny saw that the man sitting directly across from him was Art Lean. In spite of his bold words earlier, he felt glad to see a familiar face.

“Hey,” Johnny said. “What do you think of this lashup?”

“Not bad so far,” Art replied. “Have you seen the competition yet?”

Sonya, Johnny, and Liu looked at each other, then back at Art. “Nothing to worry about,” Johnny said.

Up on the dais, a procession of black-clad hooded monks was bringing out trays of food to the high table. At the same time, out among the side tables, beautiful young women and handsome young men brought food to the warriors who had gathered for Mortal Kombat.

The servant who brought a tray of brown meat in a thick red sauce to Johnny’s part of the table was tall and thin, her silk gown cut up the left side to her hip. She had a long braid of golden hair which hung down her back well past her waist. A tattoo of a lion was emblazoned on her left cheek.

“At least this girl looks human,” Johnny whispered to Liu as the wench poured steaming brown liquid into the silver goblets which stood before them.

In reply Liu whispered, “Look down.”

Johnny did so. He saw the server’s feet. They were long – almost like skis – extending in front of and behind her.

“Oh well,” Johnny said.

"Hi," said a young man a little farther down the table, "I'm Brad." He was of medium height, with brown hair and a goatee. "I was wondering: I know why I'm here, but why are *you* here?"

"To defend Earth," said the other young man beside him. The latest speaker held a garish science-fiction novel in his hand. The cover showed an eye-patched starpilot standing in his rocket ship. The starpilot looked grave.

"And you are?" Brad asked him.

"Ryan."

"Wait a minute," Brad said. "Didn't you spend some time in Leavenworth?"

"Yeah, I did," Ryan said. "Want to make something of it?"

"Not me," Brad said, turning back to the nameless deep-red sausage on his plate.

Meanwhile, Art Lean was looking at the platters of spun silver and beaten gold that the wench was heaping on the table.

"Who's bold?" he asked at last.

"Depends," Sonya replied. "What do you need done?"

"I'm wondering who's going to try this stuff first."

"Doesn't bother me," Sonya said. She lifted the goblet and tasted the contents. "Hey, if this isn't hot chocolate, it's the next best thing!"

"It's gotta be better than what I've got over here," Johnny muttered. He'd just raised the lid on a covered dish before him. The vessel was filled with nearly spherical fish studded with long spikes. Their scales were pale green in color, and their eyes were fixed and staring. The fishes' mouth were open, revealing double rows of sharp teeth. A sparkling tan glaze covered their bodies and looped from the tips of the spines.

"Looks like poached puffer in caramel sauce," Sonya said. She reached out with her chopsticks and lifted one of the fish onto her plate. "I ate worse than that at survival school."

"Say," said the blond young man sitting next to Art across the table, "aren't you Johnny Cage, the movie star?"

“Yeah,” Johnny said. He looked closer. “Aren’t you Pete, the skier?”

“He’s wicked fast,” said another young man, also sitting at the table. “I’m Jesse.”

“Glad to meet both of you,” Johnny said. “Here’s wishing you the best of luck in the tournament.”

Sonya pulled over the tray of meat and lifted two slabs of the stuff from the serving fish to her own plate. “Don’t you worry about cholesterol?” Johnny asked her.

“Nope,” she said, picking up a bit of crispy fat and munching on it. “I figure something else is probably going to kill me first. So I might as well enjoy myself.” She poked with a chopstick at one of the brown slices of meat. “I wonder what this was before it dies?”

“This is the Feast of Heroes,” Liu said. “It’s probably fried hero.”

“I don’t think that they’ve gone to all this trouble to get us here just to poison us there first night,” Art said. He started filling his own plate, though Johnny noticed that he was sticking mostly to the fruit.

“I think it’s good,” said Pete’s friend Jesse. He already had two stuffed eels on his plate and was reaching for a third.

A sudden frantic drumming silenced the crowd. The last rays of the setting sun were shining in the open door of the hall. The ruddy light made the firelight of the torches seem pale in contrast. In the silence after the drums stopped, some fifty creatures marched into the hall, two abreast.

Many of them were human, or nearly so, in shape and form. Others had grotesque animal, bird, or insect heads. Some had multiple legs. But they were all richly dressed, and all of them were armed with swords, sais, nunchucks, or staves.

They marched in perfect step to the center of the hall, and they were halted. A single drumbeat sounded, and the Outworlders turned to face one another. A second drumbeat, and they assumed fighting stances. A third, and, with a terrifying cry that sprang simultaneously from fifty inhuman throats, they began to spar.

Attacks and blocks came slowly at first, to the beat of a solitary drum. But the tempo picked up as a second drum added its sound. The slap of bare feet on the cold stone floor, the flickering shadows of the torches, the drumbeats... Johnny found the sight hypnotic. A third drumbeat began to sound, and each of the Outworld fighters turned to a new opponent. Faster and faster

came their blows and their blocks. A fourth drumbeat. A fifth. Fists, feet, and weapons were moving in blurs, too fast for the eye to follow. No sound other than the slap of feet on stone, or the whistle of the staves turned aside or blocked at the last moment, and the rasping breath of the fighters was audible. The spectators, the greatest champions of the earth, sat in stunned silence at the dizzying demonstration of agility and power.

The drumbeats came faster and faster, building to a constant roll; the Outworld champions glistened with sweat, yet still no sound other than their breathing escaped their lips.

The sun dipped below the horizon, and with the swiftness of a tropical night the darkness descended outside the open doors.

At the moment the crash of a gong overpowered all the other sounds in the Great Hall. The drums fell silent. The Outworlders froze in place, then turned and bowed to one another.

"Hell of a show," Art Lean whispered, leaning forward across the table.

"I wish their fight arranger had worked on my last film," Johnny whispered back.

Liu pointed to the half-empty dais. "Look over there."

A cortege of black-cowled monks was stepping up to the right of the dais. They clapped on hand-cymbals as they came, the jingling sound loud in the silenced hall. Behind them, borne on the shoulders of yet more monks came a litter covered with purple-and-gold damasked silk. On the litter stood Shang Tsung, dressed in a shimmering green brocade robe. More monks paced behind. When the little reached the high table in the center of the dais, the monks who carried it knelt.

The sorcerer took a step forward. His eyes swept the hall. Wherever his eyes glanced on an Outworlder, that creature bowed, whether in deference or fear Johnny couldn't be sure. Johnny himself felt a cold shudder run down his spine as the dark eyes with the flames at their bottoms swept over him.

If the Great Hall had been quiet before, it was utterly silent now.

"Welcome!" Shang cried out, his voice echoing in the rafters. His voice was deep, an unknowable power behind it. The sound made Johnny flinch.

Sonya raised her goblet to her lips and took a sip.

“Welcome, champions!” Shang cried. “You are here to compete in Mortal Kombat, the greatest of all tournaments. You should be proud! Each one of you has been chosen for your excellence, your skill, and your courage! You are the best fighters of your generation, worthy to represent the Realm of Earth...” Here Shang paused and allowed his eyes again to sweep the hall. “And the Realm of Outworld!”

Liu looked up. Against the wall by the entrance, in a corner as far as it was possible to get from Shang and still remain in the hall, he spied a humbly-clothed man. Unlike the champions of Outworld or the champions of Earth, who clustered together at the tables, the man was standing aloof from all the rest.

The beggar lifted his head under his coolie hat and looked at Liu.

“Rayden!” Liu whispered.

“Tomorrow,” Shang said from the high dais, his voice filling the hall, “in the morning, the Great Tournament will begin. The opponents will be chosen by lot. The winner of each bout will progress to the next. At the last, only one champion will remain.”

Liu turned his eyes from Rayden to Shang Tsung. When he looked back, the God of Lightning was no longer visible.

“It is a great honor for you to face the finest fighters of two worlds,” Shang continued, his voice growing louder, his words faster. “Some will even have the privilege of fighting Prince Goro, the reigning champion!”

The emperor’s sorcerer turned his eyes to the tables where the human contingent sat in puzzled silence. “You in particular,” Shang said, lowering his voice, moving his hands to take in all of the waiting humans, “are all witnesses to one of the great turning points in the history of the earth. Treasure these moments,” he said, “as if they were your last.”

The drums and flutes began to make a strange, discordant music, low at first and growing louder.

“Now,” Shang cried, raising his arms, “for your entertainment, a taste of things to come!”

“Is there anything more you require?” the lion-tattooed server asked Sonya, as the ranks of Outworld fighters in the center of the hall turned and marched out of the Great Hall.

“Everything’s pretty good so far,” Sonya said. She pointed her chopstick at a plate containing small brown balls. “Out of curiosity, what are those?”

“Ground dried bloodworms, lightly breaded and sautéed in monkey oil,” the server replied.

“They’re great,” Sonya said. She picked up another one with her chopsticks, ignoring the sound of Johnny gagging beside her.

The drums rolled. From the far doors of the hall two huge Outworld soldiers began to pace forward. They wore strange exoskeletal armor and helmets of bone which covered the entire head and face, leaving only the eyes visible. In their hands they held lances of steel with heads carved in the shapes of dragons. The creatures spun the lances around their heads and bodies as they came, the weapons whistling through the air.

The Outworld soldiers stopped in the center of the hall, not far from where Sonya and the others were sitting.

“What in the hell are those?” Johnny asked.

“Palace guards,” the servant wench replied. “The mutant hereditary soldiers of Outworld.”

The nearer guard lifted its head and howled a wordless cry of challenge at the ceiling. As if in answer, two smaller figures dressed in black – one with a blue overmantle, the other in yellow – came down from the dais where they had been standing unnoticed beside the sorcerer. The newcomers walked down the center of the hall until they faced the guards from no more than a dozen feet away.

“Ninjas,” Liu whispered.

“Yeah,” Sonya said. She pointed to the one in blue. “And I think I know that joker.”

The blue ninja in the center of the hall stood silent, head bowed as if meditating. His hands were raised to about waist level, palms facing one another a few inches apart.

A pale blue glow surrounded the ninja’s hands, growing more and more intense as the seconds passed.

“Pumping himself up for something,” Art said.

The drums and flutes raised to a piercing crescendo. The ninja in yellow stood with his hands raised in a classic ready position. All at once, something small and vicious, like a spike with teeth, flew from his right palm, directly at the guard who faced him.

The living spike was trailed by an umbilical cord leading back to the ninja's hand. The spike struck the guard. Instantly, the Outworld warrior stiffened as blood stained its armor. The lance fell away from its hands. The umbilical cord tightened, dragging the unfortunate warrior closer to the yellow ninja. When it had been pulled close enough, the yellow ninja kicked forward, high and fast, taking the guard beneath the chin. The impact ripped the spike from the guard's flesh as the Outworld warrior crashed backward to lie still on the stone floor. The living spike vanished back into the ninja's hand.

The yellow-clad ninja bowed to Shang Tsung and stepped away from the fallen warrior.

The remaining guard howled and swung its lance around its head, the steel shooting forth red reflections of the flames as it spun. The blue ninja remained motionless and silent. Without warning the guard sprang into the air and hurtled itself toward the ninja, its lance pointed at the smaller fighter's heart.

Before the leap was completed the ninja raised one hand. A mist seemed to fly from it toward the onrushing guard.

The guard sparkled as it passed through the mist. The ninja took one nimble step aside. Rather than howling, or stopping its lunge, the guard held its position, leg stretched out behind, lance pointed forward. A moment later, making no attempt to land gracefully, it smashed into the floor. And there it shattered into a hundred fragments.

Glittering bits of armor and flesh scattered over the pavement, each frozen as hard as steel. Razor-edged shards of what had been an Outworld soldier dropped on the table at which Johnny and Art sat.

"Ah," said Shang Tsung from the dais. "Flawless Victory."

The sorcerer sat at last, raised a morsel of food to his lips, and began delicately to eat.

Sonya poked at a piece of the guard that lay on the table near her plate. The frozen shard was already starting to thaw. A thin red fluid seeped out of it to stain the white tablecloth.

"Waitress," the lieutenant said, "take this back to the kitchen and warm it up for me, okay? It's a little cold."

Johnny Cage was just sitting there, stunned by what he had seen. "Shows what I get for listening to people," he muttered as he looked from the shattered remains of one guard in the center of the

hall to the corpse of the other guard lying still in a pool of blood. “Take some time off. Come to a little tournament. It’ll be good for the career. Hah. Dead people don’t have careers...”

The ninjas had rejoined Shang at the dais. The sorcerer sat watching the human champions in the hall, sipping from his goblet at rare intervals. At last Shang stood and strode down the center of the hall, with the two ninjas flanking him.

As Shang passed by, Liu stood and moved to follow.

“Hey,” Johnny said, catching Liu’s arm and pulling him back down into his seat. “Where are you going?”

“After Shang Tsung.”

“You can’t follow him. Remember what Rayden said? You aren’t ready. You’ll be killed.”

“Rayden didn’t say a word to me,” Sonya said, rising to her feet in turn. “That bastard Tsung knows where Kano is.” She started out after the sorcerer and his two ninjas. “He’s mine.”

“You gotta admire that girl’s spirit,” Johnny said, watching Sonya as she vanished into the crowd of servers, humans, and Outworlders.

“Ain’t her spirit he’s admiring,” Art said wryly from the other side of the table.

“I don’t care,” Liu said, standing again. “We can’t let her go alone.”

“Then I’m with you,” Johnny said as he drained his goblet. “Like she said on the ship, we’re a team.”

Without another moment’s hesitation, the two men rose and followed Sonya from the Great Hall. Art Lean watched them go, slowly shaking his head.

“Coach always told me that chasing women the night before a bout was a good way to get your ass kicked the next day.” He picked up another piece of fruit and nibbled at it delicately. “Me, I’m staying right here until it’s time for bed.”

Chapter Seven

Shang Tsung made his way slowly from the Great Hall and across the manicured lawn toward the statuary garden. His two ninjas trailed him on either side.

A full moon had risen and cast its ghostly light across the landscape. The demon sorcerer paused to look at the arenas on the lawn that had been prepared for the next day's fighting. Torches flared around them in the night.

"So it begins," he said. "And so it will end. In two days, three at most, the Realm of Earth will belong entirely to the emperor... and to me."

"So you say," replied a voice out of the darkness.

Rayden stepped forward, still dressed in his beggar's rags, forming a strange contrast to the silken splendor of the sorcerer. "You forget that there is a tournament to fight first. Many things may happen."

"You!" Shang said. "What are you doing here, old one? This is my domain. Here the emperor pronounces the law."

"Indeed."

"Then tell me, Rayden, god without miracles, why do you come? To see your fighters destroyed, your realm lost, and you yourself humiliated? Is it really worth the price you must pay to come here, to see those things?"

"I have reason to expect a slightly different outcome," Rayden said mildly. "Tell me, if you are so confident of the results of the tournament, why do you go even now to visit Prince Goro?"

"I pay my respects to Outworld's greatest champion," Shang Tsung said. "What is so odd about that?"

"Nothing, if you did not travel with your ninjas," Rayden said. "Did you think I would not recognize Sub-Zero and Scorpion? If you go to visit a friend and ally, you have no need of those two."

"My reasons are not to be questioned by such as you!" Shang said. He stepped forward into the darkness of the path into the garden.

“Of course not,” Rayden said and bowed as Shang Tsung passed. A moment later the darkness swallowed him as well.

In the silence that followed a shadow flitted from one area of darkness to another. It paused in an inky pool at the base of one of the statues. Sonya was following Shang, allowing her dark uniform to blend with the shadows, using all available cover to hide her progress from her prey. With careful eyes she watched Shang and his escorts proceed, then move silently to the next shadow. Her motions were sure and swift.

Tsung did not vary from the path nor did he look back, as if he did not consider the possibility that he might be followed.

Rather than taking the road which led to the stairway on the cliff, Shang took another branch which led down a slope, then led against a looming cliff. The path continued through a high-arched portal in the cliff, carved into arabesques and ornate traceries. Flaring torches were set all about the portal, along the path leading to it, then up, over, and around the opening.

Shang paced in, Sub-Zero and Scorpion at his side, never breaking stride. A shadow attached itself to the cliff face just beyond the torches’ flare.

Even as the shadow froze in the darkness, a crunching sound came from the path the sorcerer had just traveled. A moment later two figures came into view. Liu and Johnny were talking in the direction where Shang had just passed.

The two men reached the portal. The shadow reached out and snatched Johnny into the darkness under the stones.

Johnny found himself facing a furious Special Forces lieutenant, her hand twisting the cloth of his collar choking-tight. Her was blackened with camouflage paint; only her eyes and teeth glittered in the flickering light.

“Just what in the *hell* do you think you’re doing here?” she hissed.

“We’re going to help you out,” Johnny said.

“I do not need your help,” Sonya said. “You aren’t trained or equipped to work with me. Part of my job is to save civilian lives. I’m performing that mission tasking right now and saving your life. This goes for you and your buddy: Get your dumb ass back to the Great Hall, plant it in a chair, and keep it there.”

“I can’t help it,” Johnny said. “It’s a guy thing.”

“Letting the little head think for the big one? Yeah, it sure is. I’m too busy to waste any more time protecting you. Get lost.”

Liu stood by for a moment. “Shang Tsung is mine,” he said, then turned and walked into the tunnel opening.

“Damn,” Sonya said, and dropped Johnny’s collar. She, too, vanished into the tunnel’s mouth.

Johnny stood for a moment, undecided. Then he snatched up a torch from the portal’s side and entered the tunnel as well.

The torch flared high overhead, illuminating the dark stone walls. Soon the tunnel bent and the patch of light that was the entrance vanished. Johnny walked a few paces farther on before the walls and the ceiling of the tunnel opened out and he found himself in a vast dark cavern. Beyond the tiny patch of illuminated sand beneath his feet he might as well have been floating in space. Total blackness extended in all directions. He walked on in what he hoped was a straight line. The floor had been sandy and laced with footprints. Now it became hard stone. The path narrowed to a roadway of lighter stone some ten feet across, with darkness on either side. Then the roadway branched.

“Which way?” Johnny asked himself.

Flipping a mental coin, he headed left. Soon the road branched again. This time Johnny turned right. He proceeded as quickly as he dared amid an ever-branching web of roads on the cavern floor.

Without warning, his feet were swept out from under him. He landed flat on his back on the stone, the torch flying from his hand.

It arced up and over, falling into one of the dark areas between the gray flagstone roads. And it continued to fall, down and down, its light growing more feeble. It went out. After a long time the sound of a distant impact sounded, echoing up from far below.

A voice whispered in his ear.

“Are you dumber than you look? When you are sneaking up on someone in a dark environment, it is *not* a tactically wise decision to carry a flaming torch!”

“Sonya?” Johnny whispered back.

“No, it’s the tooth fairy. Listen up. Aside from terminal stupidity, what are you doing down here?”

“I’m helping you catch Kano.”

He heard a sigh next to his ear.

“Civilians,” Sonya muttered, making the word sound like a curse. “You were destroying your night vision and you were alerting anyone within eyeshot that you’re here. In a combat situation that would draw fire. Try not to draw fire. It tends to annoy those around you.”

“You need me,” Johnny said. “This place is a maze, and your compass isn’t working. But I’m not lost. When you get to know me better–”

“Now *there’s* a happy thought.”

“–you’ll realize that I never get lost. I never have to ask for directions, and I always find a parking spot. Usually there’s time on the meter, too.”

“Shut up,” Sonya explained.

Johnny rolled over carefully, making sure that he wasn’t going over the edge of the roadway. He blinked a couple of times. Without the torch blinding him it was getting easier to see. Up ahead there was a lighter patch. It looked like reflected firelight on a rock wall.

And in that firelight he could see a shadow. A huge shadow of a human figure. The shadow stretched its arms. One – two – three – four.

“Four arms?” Johnny asked. “You don’t suppose that’s some guy doing shadow pictures with his hands and in a minute he’s going to do a bunny or a flying bird, do you?”

“There are other ways besides drawing fire to annoy those around you,” Sonya said. For some reason Johnny got the impression of clenched teeth. “Now are you going to be sensible, or do I have to punch you out, leave you here, and pick you up on my way back?”

“Listen,” Johnny said.

From somewhere up ahead came the sound of male voices, a deep rumbling of conversation. The words were indistinct.

"Let's go," Sonya said.

She started off, walking carefully but quickly. Johnny found that he could see her silhouette against the firelight ahead. The path branched again and again but Sonya went along as surely as if she knew the way, guided by the light. The path ended when it entered an opening in a rock wall. A narrow way led to the right, while the main road broke into a set of wide stairs to go to the floor of the cavern.

Sonya went to the right, and Johnny followed her.

The path they were on edged around a huge natural cavern. It turned into a ledge high above the floor. Giant stalactites and stalagmites hung down from above and thrust up from below. Hundreds of blazing torches filled sconces throughout the hall. Sonya made her way along the ledge to a point overlooking a large ebony table. Gold and silver tableware lay scattered over its surface.

In the reflected light of the torches Johnny could make out another form on the ledge. It was Liu, lying and looking down at the back of a giant of a man sitting on a massive throne.

"About time you showed up," Liu whispered as Sonya and Johnny approached. "If the legends aren't lying, then the big fellow down there is Goro."

"The guy Shang Tsung mentioned in his little speech?" Johnny asked.

"The same. He's the reigning champion of Mortal Kombat."

Johnny looked at Goro with renewed interest. The man on the throne wore a cape of blue silk around his massive shoulders. Long hair flowed from his head, falling far down the back of his char to about the level of his shoulders. His golden earrings sparkles in the firelight.

Goro held a jewel-encrusted mirror in his left hand, a metal file in his right. He was calmly working on sharpening the points of his teeth. Four palace guards, their exoskeletal armor gleaming, stood at attention of either side of him.

Another, much smaller figure sat across the table from Goro – a man in a business suit. Johnny figured that he was probably a large man, but in comparison to Goro he appeared slight and frail. A welter of dirty dishes and crockery littered the table around him.

A black-robed monk entered the hall from an unseen opening, another bowl of food in his hands. As he passed the table, the smaller of the two snaked out a hand.

"Hey, give me some of that!" he said, taking the bowl from the monk and transferring most of its contents to a plate in front of him in an untidy heap.

"So anyway," the man was saying, "then he freezes this guy and he shatters. You could see his guts and everything! Almost lust my lunch!"

The man rammed another wad of food into his mouth and began chewing noisily.

"Disgusting," Goro said. The champion's voice was deep, his tone incongruously cultured.

The other man went on with his narrative, although he hadn't yet swallowed his last mouthful of food. "And then that Shang Tsung guy gave a speech."

He belched and thumped his chest with his fist.

"And if that Shang Tsung's such a great sorcerer, how come he has such a lousy-looking boat? Guy gives me the creeps. 'Treasure these moments,' he says..."

The speaker looked up. One red eye gleamed in his face, in the metal plate which covered the right side of his skull.

"Kano!" Sonya whispered. "The things you see when you don't have a rifle."

Liu and Johnny both put their hands on Sonya's shoulders to keep her from rising. She shrugged them off.

Goro spoke again. "Gave you the creeps, did he? That was his intention."

The champion examined his teeth in the hand mirror and gave one of his canines a slight touch with his file. Then he looked at Kano, seated across the table. "Shang Tsung is a great sorcerer. The wise cultivate his favor. Those who challenge his power become his slaves."

"Haven't seen any slaves around," Kano said, tearing the meat from a bone with his teeth.

"You fool," Goro whispered. He leaned across the table. "He enslaves souls. When a warrior dies, the sorcerer takes his essence and makes it part of his own. For this reason he can never be

defeated. He has a thousand spirits to call to his aid. Shang learned that Black Art from the emperor himself."

"Emperor, eh?" Kano belched again, and took a deep drink from one of the several goblets which stood before him. A silent monk stepped forward to refill it. "You're some kind of royalty too, right?"

"How very perceptive of you," Goro said, his tone mocking. With that he stood and cast off the cloak. He was wearing only a simple loincloth supported by a golden belt. He raised his hands holding the mirror and the file – and then he raised two more arms. Rich bracers glittered on all four of his wrists.

"I am the leader," he said, "of all the Outworld armies, and a prince of the subterranean realm of Shokan."

"Four arms?" Johnny whispered. "*Four arms!* Liu, was that in the legends too?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Liu whispered back. "He's a half-dragon. It's how I recognized him. He holds you with two of his arms and beats you to death with the other two."

"Oh goodie," Johnny said.

Jax walked across the plaza toward the Temple of the Order of Light. Mr. Chu had been adamant about keeping to himself anything he knew about the dragon amulet, but with any kind of luck the people here would be more forthcoming. Jax had another couple of reasons for being hopeful: the Hong Kong police's list of recent murders had placed one here, and the list of known fighters from passport control had contained one man whose last-known address was here.

Right now, though, it would pay to go slow and be polite. Jax looked around. Over near the temple entrance an old man in white, the color of mourning, sat on a mat in the sun. Jax headed over to the old one, bowed, and said, "Greetings, honored one. I am Major Jackson Briggs of the Joint Eurasian Anti-Drug Task Force. I seek assistance from the priests of the Order of Light. Can you help me find them?"

"They are within, at their devotions," the old man said. "Perhaps I can be of help to you?"

“Perhaps,” Jax said. “I seek information on a tournament. I was told that the Order of Light knows something of such matters.”

“A tournament, you say? Come with me.”

The old man slowly rose and rolled up his mat. He walked into the temple grounds and stood beside a gong. Jax followed. When the Special Forces major got close, the old man pointed to his chest. “Tell me, what concern of yours is this tournament of which you speak?”

“One of my personnel appears to have been trapped into being there,” Jax said. “I want to get her out.”

“That would be very unusual,” the old man said. “No one goes to that tournament without an invitation. It is not likely that your soldier had such a thing without knowing it.”

“Would an invitation look like this?” Jax asked. He reached into a pocket and pulled out the amulet. He laid the small circle on the framework of the gong.

A long pause followed. “I seem to have misjudged you,” the old man said at last. “Yes, you are concerned with the tournament. As it happens, my own grandson is one of the fighters there.”

“Where is the tournament?”

“That I cannot say. I have never been there.”

“You mean I can’t do anything?” Jax asked.

“No,” the old man said. “You can stay here with me. You can wait. And if you are the sort of man who prays, you can pray.”

In the caves beneath the island, Sonya, Liu, and Johnny lay hidden on a ledge. Down below the three companions, the conversation between Kano and Prince Goro continued.

“Subterranean? Is that like underground?” Kano asked.

“Something like that,” the four-armed prince said. He sounded amused.

“Really? Well, I’m an underworld chief myself, back home.”

“How lucky for them. Back home.”

“It is true, Prince Goro,” came another voice. Shang Tsung stepped forward into the torchlight, his two ninjas at his side. The four guards saluted the sorcerer and bowed low. Goro, too, made a bow to Shang Tsung. Shang acknowledged him with a nod.

The emperor’s sorcerer walked forward until he could place his fingertips lightly on Kano’s shoulders. “Do you think,” Shang said, his voice gentle and conversational, “that I would choose such a disreputable-looking cretin to carry about my bidding if he was not, in fact, an underworld chief?”

“Look at him,” Goro said, speaking of Kano as if the crime lord wasn’t there. “No dignity.”

“I know,” Shang said. “No manners either. But in the Realm of Earth, men such as he can amass great wealth and almost godlike power.”

“Unlike this realm,” Goro said.

“True.”

“Excuse me, gents,” Kano said, his red eye bright in the dimness. “But I’d like to get back to that ‘amassing’ as soon as possible. I carried out all the terms of my agreement. When do I get paid?”

“Ah, yes,” Shang said. “You did cause the girl to come aboard the *Dragon Wing* of her own free will. Her presence is very important to my plans, and you succeeded. For that you shall be rewarded. Amply. There is, however, one more task you must perform.”

Chapter Eight

"One more task?" Kano roared, half rising to his feet. "You want extra, you have to pay extra."

"Calm yourself, my friend." Shang Tsung looked at the criminal warlord with an imperious glance. "You shall be amply paid. Your richly deserved reward shall come, however, *after* you have fought against the girl."

"Now that's a kind of extra job I like," Kano said, chuckling as he sat back in his chair. He reached again for his wine cup and spilled some of the contents down his chin as he drained it. The red wine dripped like a trickle of blood.

"The girl must not be harmed," Shang said. "Only humiliated."

"I can think of lots of ways to that." Kano chuckled again. "Nothing I'd like to do more than get right in between her legs."

Up on the ledge, Sonya listened, her expression fixed, eyes glittering. Without thinking of what she was doing, her hand found her empty holster.

"Damn," she muttered.

The sorcerer Shang looked at Kano, his deep black eyes blazing, as if looking into the larger man's soul.

"Yes," Shang said at last. "I have seen your future, and you shall have your wish. Only recall, when the time comes, that I have plans for the beautiful Sonya. She must not be permanently damaged."

"Well, let me at her," Kano said. He ripped a chunk of meat away from a bone with his teeth and chewed noisily. "Just put me in the same room as her. That's all I ask. You think I like hiding down here in this stinking cave like some kind of slimy toad?"

Goro leaned forward, placing the large three-fingered hands from his upper arms down flat on the table to either side of Kano, and lowered himself until his huge head was directly level with that of the Hong Kong crime boss. For a long moment, the half-dragon looked deep into Kano's face, his eyes unblinking.

Then he interlaced the fingers of his lower arms and ostentatiously cracked his knuckles.

“Toad?” he asked, his voice very calm.

“No offense intended,” Kano said in a rush. He smiled nervously as Prince Goro’s lower right arm, muscles ripping, stretched out until the huge hand with its gold wrist ornaments hovered a mere foot from his throat.

“None taken,” Goro said, very politely. He stretched his hand a trifle farther, and, with his open palm slapped Kano lightly on the cheek.

Then the Shokan prince stood up and away from Kano. His long hair swung behind him as he moved. Kano remained leaning back in his chair, with a weak smile plastered on his face.

The silence in the cavern grew very deep. At last Goro turned back to the sorcerer. “To what do we owe the honor of your visit, Shang Tsung?” he asked, his voice rumbling and low.

“I came to warn you that Kung Lao’s descendant is competing in the tournament,” Shang said. “You must handle him carefully.”

“You come with news I already possess,” Goro said, turning to face the sorcerer directly. “I saw this Liu Kang when he entered the Great Hall. He reminds me of his ancestor. Even if he has his ancestor’s skill, however, he will pose no problem.”

“Don’t underestimate the resourcefulness of these humans,” Shang Tsung said sharply, “or they will be your downfall. This tournament can still be lost.”

“Need I remind you, emperor’s sorcerer, that it was you who lost a bout to Kung Lao, and not I? A common monk brought you low – and the series of Mortal Kombats nearly ended before it had well begun.”

Goro picked up his own goblet of wine and sipped at it as if to emphasize his disdain. “I saved your plans and your reputation by defeating Kung Lao,” he continued after a moment, “just as I have defeated every human whom I have fought since that day, for the last five hundred of their years. This time it will be no different. Victory is assured.”

Shang stood, his eyes blazing, for a moment before he could continue. “This is no time for foolish pride,” he said at last. “We have never been so close to absolute victory.”

Then the demon caught himself and lowered his eyes and his voice to speak more humbly. “Which is why I have come to tell you of another danger. The Princess Kitana.”

“The emperor’s adopted daughter?” Goro asked. “Why should I worry about her? She is a danger to you, maybe; not to me.”

“Do you think you would long retain your title as general of the Outworld armies, Prince of the Shokan though you may be, if our beloved emperor did not sit on the emerald throne?” asked the sorcerer. “Kitana uses her age and her position as a shield to cover her rebellion. She alone keeps alive the memory of the ancient realm before our benevolent master came and conquered Outworld. Her pathetic followers pose no threat to those of us who rule now, but she must not be allowed to join her power with the forces from the Realm of Earth – especially Liu Kang.”

Johnny, Liu, and Sonya, hiding on their ledge, listened and watched as Goro and Shang talked.

“What’s so special about you?” Johnny whispered to Liu.

“I don’t know,” Liu whispered back.

“Then what about this Kitana person?”

“I don’t know, other than that Kitana is ten thousand years old and the rightful heir to the throne of Outworld.”

“More legends?”

“Yeah.”

“Shut up, both of you,” Sonya muttered.

Down below them, in Goro’s throne room, Shang Tsung faced the four-armed giant. “See that your confidence is not misplaced,” Shang said. “The emperor will not tolerate failure... and neither will I.”

“I,” Goro said pointedly, “do not fail.”

He sipped again at his wine, his head cocked as if listening. Then he looked at the four guards who stood nearby at attention. He gestured, pointing left and right, and jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the ledge where the three companions lay hidden.

“I don’t like this,” Liu said.

“That conversation was getting boring anyway,” said Johnny. “Let’s get out of here.”

“For once I agree,” Sonya said. She began crawling backward off of the ledge.

“What’s going on?” Kano’s voice came from below.

“We are not alone,” Goro replied.

“This way,” Liu whispered. He scuttled off crabwise in the direction in which they had originally been going. A portal in the side of the cavern opened before them.

Then, with a clatter of armor two guards leapt up onto the ledge. They clutched dragon-headed lances.

“To hell with this sneaking around,” Sonya said.

She did a roll and spring toward the pursuing guards. Supported only by her hands, her body parallel to the floor, her right foot snapped out in a kick that took the lead guard in the center of his chest as his lance whistled harmlessly over her head. The impact drove the creature back into his companion. They both fell from the ledge.

Sonya rolled to her feet and sprinted for the side tunnel, with Johnny and Liu beside her.

The tunnel was smoothly rounded, with a flat floor of dry-laid stone. A fire-like glow came from channels at either side of the tunnel, near the floor, lighting the three from below as they ran. The tunnel took a sharp turn, went on for another dozen feet, then entered a circular chamber. Three other tunnels carved in the stone radiated from the room, each tunnel identical to the one from which they had just emerged.

Johnny blinked. “Which way?”

“You’re the guy with the sense of direction,” Sonya said. “You tell me.”

“Look,” Liu said. He pointed down the tunnel that branched to the left. Johnny looked and saw the silken figure of the woman from the dais, the one who had watched them arrive in the garden. She held a blazing torch over her head, and she beckoned them on with her other hand.

“She must be Princess Kitana,” Liu said. “I think she wants us to follow her. She must be trying to help!”

“I think you’re a little hard up for a date,” Johnny said.

Liu headed down the passageway the woman had marked. Sonya shrugged and followed him. Johnny, unwilling to be left behind, followed her.

"I think she's trying to lead us out," Liu said, jogging down the tunnel. The light from below cast weird shadows on his face.

"Forget about her," Johnny said. "She's ten thousand years old."

They arrived in another circular room. Like the last it had a high, dome-shaped ceiling of rough rock, and three more twisty little passages, all alike, leading from it.

"Never underestimate the attraction of an older woman," Liu said. He pointed down one of the passages, this time the one to the right. Princess Kitana was far down that passage, beckoning. "I'm going to follow her."

Liu plunged into the passage.

"Liu!" Johnny called after him.

"Everyone has his own path," Sonya said, coming up beside Johnny. "Liu has chosen his."

"What's yours?"

"For the moment I'm going with Liu."

The shadows of a pair of guards in the passage behind them emphasized that it was time to go.

"I don't see why he's following that princess," Johnny complained to Sonya as the two of them hurried down the passage after Liu.

"Given that Goro and Shang don't want him to meet her, I'd say that getting the two of them together should be real high on our priority list."

They entered yet another round room and found themselves faced with three new openings identical to the archway from which they had just emerged.

"Which way?" Johnny asked again.

“There’s Liu.” Sonya pointed. Their companion was far down the passage directly ahead of them. “Let’s pick up the pace and catch up with him. We don’t want to split up and get lost down here.”

They headed out at an easy but quick rhythm, running side by side.

“I hate this,” Johnny said. “Not knowing where I’m going or what’s going to happen next.”

“Not like having a copy of the script, eh?” Sonya commented. “Like in one of your movies.”

“You’ve seen my films?”

They came to another round room. Liu was in the left passage; they’d gained on him, but he was almost out of sight. The monochromatic light from the sides of the tunnels made it difficult to dell distances.

“That way.”

This time it was Johnny who pointed, and followed Liu without breaking stride. Sonya followed right behind him.

“Which of my films have you seen?” Johnny persisted as soon as he and Sonya were in a passage again. There were no obvious sounds of pursuit.

“Does it matter? They’re all alike.”

“No they aren’t!”

“There’s always a girl in trouble, and you rescue her, right? That’s the plot. And now you’re trying to fit the real world into a movie, and it just isn’t working.”

“I am not!”

“Then what – exactly – brought you down here?”

They came to another circular room. Sonya spotted Liu in the passage ahead of them and sprinted past Johnny to take the lead.

Liu was running fast and free, confident of the way. Every time he needed to make a choice of path he saw Princess Kitana with her torch indicating the direction. He was sure that she would lead him out. He could hear the footsteps of his two companions following him. They were still safe, guided as he was by Kitana.

He felt in fine shape, his body well-tuned, his legs moving easily. Liu entered another room. Where was Princess Kitana? He looked left, right, ahead... and a patch of the gray stone wall seemed to come to life directly in front of him.

Liu had only a moment to react. He dropped into a defensive stance. The odd patch of living wall opened a pair of pale green eyes. A misshapen head broke away from the wall, its mouth opened, and a mist of greenish vapor sprayed out of the creature's mouth into Liu's face.

The vapor hit Liu before he could react. His eyes burned, his mouth and nose felt like they were on fire. It was all he could do to avoid screaming, avoid dragging the stinging mist deep into his lungs. He fell to the ground, curled, and rolled away from the attack.

He could feel his face burning. His eyes were shut tight. He listened. The only sound he heard was the footsteps of his two companions. They were approaching.

Watch out! he wanted to cry, but even drawing air into his lungs was painful.

Sonya and Johnny both spotted Liu lying on the floor at the same time.

"Keep watch," Sonya snapped at Johnny, at the same time dropping to her knees beside Liu.

"Acid," Liu managed to whisper.

"It's okay, trooper," Sonya said. "I'll fix you right up."

She unsnapped the canteen at her right hip from her pistol belt and twisted off the cap. Then she gently washed the acid out of his eyes and away from his exposed skin.

"Looks like a first degree chemical burn," she said shortly. "Slight reddening of the skin, a little edema, not too bad. Can you open your eyes? Can you see?"

Liu opened his eyes a crack and squinted up at her.

"Yeah, I can see. Thanks."

“Right,” Sonya said, standing and returning her canteen to its pouch. “Report.”

Liu got to his feet. “There was something, there...” he pointed. “In the wall.”

Johnny walked over to the spot where Liu had indicated. He examined the wall closely, touching it and pressing on it.

“Whatever it was,” he said at last, “it isn’t there now.”

“There was definitely a creature. I think it’s following the princess,” Liu said.

“How do you know it isn’t just something that lives in these tunnels?” Johnny asked.

“Call it a hunch, a feeling.”

“I have a hunch,” Sonya said, “that we should be going.” She pointed to the wall of the tunnel from which they had just emerged. The shadow of a pair of guards was dancing on the wall. “I don’t think those guys are just planning to sell us magazine subscriptions, if you know what I mean.”

“Do you know which way Kitana went?” Johnny asked Liu.

Liu looked around. He couldn’t remember how many similar rooms he’d seen so far tonight. The tunnels all looked alike. He shook his head sadly.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I got all turned around, and all these openings look the same.”

“Okay,” Johnny said, pointing to the left. “Let’s go that way.” He started walking briskly into the tunnel.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Sonya said.

“Me, too,” Liu said. “But we have to do something, unless you want to fight the guards right here.”

“Relax,” Johnny said over his shoulder. “I know exactly where I’m going. Princess Kitana went this way. I can smell her perfume.”

“I can’t smell anything,” Liu said to Sonya. “Can you smell anything?”

“We’ll just have to make do,” Sonya said. “Right now I think that splitting up would be a poor decision.”

She and Liu followed Johnny down his tunnel.

Chapter Nine

The lady and her retainers had left the high table in the Great Hall a few minutes after Shang departed.

Art Lean stood and looked about him. The hall was still crowded. He stooped and recovered his overnight bag from beneath the table.

“Time to find a place to sleep,” he said. With a final sip of the chocolate he placed the goblet back on the table and started to look around.

By the smell, other parts of the feast hall had gotten stronger things to drink than cocoa. The fumes of wine rose from one section, and the burning smell of whisky greeted him in another place.

“What, did I wind up at the training table?” he asked himself. If so, he couldn’t figure out why he’d been so honored. Not that he’d wanted to imbibe. If he was going to face something like the Outworld fighters he’d seen displaying their skills during dinner, he didn’t need to do it with a hangover.

By the doors he found one of the monks.

“Say, can you tell me where I might find a bed?” Art asked.

The monk turned and beckoned Art to follow him. Outside the hall the night was dark. The moon had set, and the stars glittered with cold brilliance far above.

Still silent, the monk pointed to the right, past a field where innumerable torches flared. Their flickering marked the rings where, Art supposed, the great tournament would be fought the next morning.

“Seems to be my day for walking,” Art said with resignation. His legs, after sitting so long in the Great Hall, were definitely feeling the exercise he’d gotten climbing the cliff. He slung his bag up on his shoulder and headed off in the direction the monk had pointed.

Dark shapes of other fighters were drifting among the rings when Art arrived on the field One group was sitting in a circle, around a fire they had built from thin branches. A pair of crossed swords lay on the ground, and a barefoot man stripped to the waist was dancing among them, his arms held above his head, his eyes looking into the distance rather than down at his feet. Another

man with a small flute was playing a tune, faster and faster. Faster and faster the dancer's feet flew between the upturned edges of the swords.

Everyone has their own way of preparing, Art thought. *One misstep and he'll be missing a foot.*

The others in the circle were passing around a bottle of amber liquid, taking drinks and passing the bottle on. Sweat glistened on the dancer's chest.

Art continued on. That wasn't the only place on the field where he could hear the sound of music. Somewhere far away he heard the sound of bagpipes.

Beside him Art saw one of the fighting rings. No one else was around.

"Let's see what kind of place this is going to be," he muttered. He'd prepare by getting familiar with the dimensions of the ring. He climbed over the ropes which separated this patch of ground from the general field. Torches set in sconces flared at the four corners of the ring.

Art pulled off his shoes and socks to allow his feet to feel the texture here. The interior was springy underfoot, with a rough texture which would make finding traction no problem. Art walked from side to side, getting the measurements of the ring into his head. He stood in the center of the ring and closed his eyes, stretching out with his feelings, becoming aware of how the place sounded, how it smelled, the touch of it under his feet, internalizing all the parts.

Then, eyes still closed, he tried a simple kick. It flew out crisp and strong. He pulled back to stance, spun, and fired a kick in the opposite direction.

"Yes," he said. "I can live with this."

With greater and greater speed, Art began his kata, the practice routine which limbered him up and fixed the sequences of moves in his mind. He leapt and whirled, blocking invisible opponents, attacked, retreated, all in time to his inner senses. Art felt the strength and sureness flow through him. Higher and higher he jumped, spinning faster and faster.

"Hey, look at the dojo ballerina," he heard a man's voice from somewhere outside of his personal space.

"Sure dances pretty," said another voice. "Think he can fight?"

"What, and mess up that cute little face?" said another. "Don't reckon he's got the guts to fight. Not against real men."

Art landed on his feet, legs together. Not allowing the voices from outside the ring to disturb the serenity which the kata had given him, he bowed to his imaginary opponent, then relaxed and opened his eyes.

"Think he can hear us?" one of the voices from outside said.

"Depends. Think he's deaf and stupid, or just stupid?"

Art held his position. "If one of you gentlemen would care to enter the ring, I would be honored to spar with you," he said quietly.

"Nah," came a voice from the darkness outside. "But if you got the guts to come out here, we'll be happy to kick your ass for you."

Art shook his head. "Everyone has their own way of preparing," he said to himself. And then, louder: "As you wish."

He moved to the ropes near where he had left his overnight bag and nimbly jumped over them onto the lawn. The grass felt cool and damp under his feet. Perhaps slippery, he thought. Something else to take into account.

Away from the torches' glare Art found himself surrounded by four big men. One carried two large knives, another held a length of pipe, the other two were bare-handed.

"There is no need for fighting among ourselves, we who come from Earth," Art said as he sized them up. They were big, it was true, and apparently strong, but it seemed to him that they were most likely self-taught in the martial arts. Their stances did not reflect any particular school. "The enemy is Shang Tsung and his warriors of Outworld. We humans are on the same team."

"Maybe we don't want you on our team," the man with the pipe in his hands replied. "We think we're better off without your kind."

"That," Art said, "is regrettable."

The four began to close in.

In the tunnels underground, Johnny led while Liu and Sonya followed. From floor to ceiling the tunnel was filled with giant spiderwebs. Johnny brushed them aside and continued forward.

“I think it’s safe to assume that no one’s been this way in a while,” Sonya commented.

“I don’t care about that”, Liu said. “Not as much as I worry about meeting the spiders who put these things in place.”

“I think we had some of them for dinner,” Sonya said. “Hey, Johnny, what’s your sense of direction say?”

“We’re still on the right path,” Johnny said. “You know what I said about Kitana’s perfume? I still smell it.”

“The only thing I smell is bullshit,” Sonya said quietly, but Johnny didn’t hear.

They turned another corner and found an opening into a larger chamber. They walked out into the bigger room.

“See?” Johnny said. “I told you I’d find the way out.”

“This is out?” Liu said. His eyes took in the room. Stalactites and stalagmites, flaring torches, a golden throne...

“We’re right back where we started.”

They were alone. The table was still covered by the wreckage of Kano’s meal, but neither Kano, Goro, nor any of the guards was in sight.

“Yeah, I think I did pretty good,” Johnny said. He gestured at the wide stairway. “Out is that direction.”

The trio started toward the stairs, across the deserted open center of the room. With a clatter of armor, two guards appeared from the gloom in front of them. The three humans froze.

“I don’t like this,” Liu said.

“Me neither,” Sonya said.

“Not too bad,” said Johnny. “Two of them, three of us. Piece of cake.”

Two more guards appeared, coming around to the group’s left rear. Another two came up behind them from the right.

“Oh, hell,” Sonya said.

“Okay,” Johnny said. “Still not too bad. There’s only six of them. That’s two apiece for all of us.”

“So you can count,” Sonya said. She looked at the advancing guards. “I sure hope you can fight, too.”

In Goro’s cavern throne room, Liu and Sonya took defensive stances behind Johnny, feet widely spaced, hands curled in loose fists.

The guards circled the group. Sonya and Liu turned with them until the three humans stood in an open triangle, all of them facing outward in different directions. Armor clattered and clacked. Only the guards’ eyes were visible behind their grotesque bone helmets.

Two of the guards split off to confront Liu. One of them took a stance in front of Sonya. The others arranged themselves in front of Johnny.

“Three?” Johnny said. “How come I get three?” He addressed the trio of guards in front of him. “So what’s the matter with those other guys?”

Moving as one, all of the guards attacked, their dragon lances spinning in circles above their heads.

Sonya watched her opponent rush in. She counted slowly, one, two, three. On three she jumped straight up, arms extended. She grabbed the guard’s lance just below the head in both hands as she overheard in a vertical somersault.

The guard kept his grip on the lance even though the girl in front of him had vanished. Then Sonya came down from her somersault, still holding the lance. She had twisted in midair so she was now facing the guard’s back. Using her momentum to carry her, she rolled away, pulling the guard over as she fell on her back.

With both legs she kicked up, taking the guard in the spine as she went down. The armored creature lost its balance and its grip on the lance and fell. Her legs caught it and pushed it away. It flew over her head into the darkness.

Sonya completed her roll back to her feet, captured lance in hand. As part of the same motion she leapt in the direction in which her guard had fallen. She used the lance like a vaulting pole to send herself flying feet-first to where the guard was coming to its feet in a defensive stance. It swept her legs with its left arm in a circular block that forced her to drop to the stone floor. She barely missed smashing into the guard's face with her boots.

"Fast," Sonya said, "but not fast enough."

She whipped the end of the lance forward, chest-high, using all the force of her shoulders to punch it toward the guard.

In another part of the main room Liu dropped to the floor, catching himself on his hands as the first attack pressed home. Spinning on his hands, he scissored out his legs, catching the legs of one of the guards who faced him. The guard fell, and its momentum lifted Liu back onto his feet.

Liu sprang into the air, coming down heels first on the back of the fallen guard, his legs snapping straight down in a vertical kick at the moment of impact.

The guard had been trying to lift itself to its hands and knees. The force of Liu's attack dropped it straight back to the floor, the wind driven from its lungs.

Liu jumped again, straight up, using the body of his fallen opponent for a trampoline as the lance of his second foe passed whistling through the place where his torso had been a fraction of a second earlier. At the top of his leap, Liu fired a snap kick at the second guard's face and connected.

He kicked again and again, five times in rapid succession, each kick smashing into the guard's armored faceplate, before he hit the ground again. Without a moment's hesitation he sprang backward, his body forming a perfect arch. He caught himself on his hands, then continued the leap backward to regain his feet.

The guard's lance swung down at him as he jumped away. Only sheer nimbleness kept Liu from being cut in two by the swinging steel head of the lance. The guard recovered its balance and took a slow step forward.

As Liu and Sonya fought their opponents, Johnny took a slow step to the side, dropping his center of gravity, being very careful not to cross his feet as he moved. The three guards who faced him were moving, too, forward and to the sides, trying to get him into the center of a triangle. Once he was surrounded, Johnny knew, they would attack.

No reason, he thought, for him to wait on their convenience. He did a fast jump to his right, closing his range to the guard on that side and hooking the creature's leg out from under it. The guard didn't lose its balance – that would be too much to hope for with such a simple move – but the maneuver did change the rhythm of the contest and gave the initiative to Johnny.

Now, instead of reacting to the guards, they would have to react to him.

Using the same motion he had used to sweep the first guard's leg, Johnny spun around and brought up his right left in a flying roundhouse kick to the second guard's head. Even that guard wasn't Johnny's main target. He continued to spin, drawing closer to the third guard. Once he got in range, his left hand whipped out to grasp the creature's left wrist.

Johnny pulled and twisted himself, using the guard's mass to alter his momentum, until he was standing behind and to the guard's left, the Outworlder's left arm extended across his body in front of him. Johnny kicked with his right leg, a fast circle to the back of the guard's knees. At the same time he smashed his right fist in hammer-hand position into the middle of the guard's chest. The warrior fell backward.

Johnny went down with it, going to one knee, his left thigh parallel to the ground. The guard's left arm came across Johnny's thigh, and its own falling weight broke its elbow.

Johnny let go and rolled to the right, snatching up the lance the guard had dropped when it hit the floor. He rolled to his feet, lance before him.

His wounded opponent rolled until it was facedown, then used its good arm to rise. A glittering knife appeared in the guard's good hand. Johnny's other two opponents circled wide, getting on opposite sides of him.

Johnny raised the captured lance above his head, holding it in both hands in a blocking position. He felt a blow strike into the wooden center of the haft, a blow which had been meant for his head. But he didn't dare linger. The other guard was thrusting in at Johnny's unprotected stomach. He swung his lance down, still holding it with both hands, and only barely managed to knock the blow aside. The barbed steel head of the lance missed his body by a fraction of an inch.

Sonya, not twenty feet away, felt the handle of her lance tingle in her hands with the impact of its head on the side of her guard. But the armored creature didn't seem to notice the blow. It stepped forward, hands moving as it sought an opening in her defenses. She whipped up the butt of the

lance, hoping to take the guard in the groin, but it twisted so that the weapon struck it on its armored side. The guard stepped forward again, seeking to grapple with her.

Sonya braced for the attack.

Not far away, Liu Kang eyed the guard in front of him. He paused for a moment to judge the range, then rolled forward, lance in hand. His guard swung its weapon down at him, but the lance head struck the floor and not his rapidly moving body. Sparks flew as the steel hit the stone pavement.

Liu stopped himself by slapping the floor with both hands. He jumped up, his open hand angled upward to catch the guard under the edge of its helmet. The guard moved its head aside, but Liu swung his arm and struck a blow which spun the Outworld fighter halfway around.

Johnny Cage, meanwhile, was too busy to pay attention to what Liu was doing. The actor watched the progress of his three opponents warily. One of them was wounded, but they were all still dangerous. He tucked up his captured lance beneath his arm, and thrust it backward with all the strength in his arms and shoulders. The weapon took the guard behind him in the center of its solar plexus. The creature stopped, confused.

Johnny whipped the weapon forward, then up and over his shoulder, catching it with his left hand before bringing it whistling forward again. The lance's speed and momentum increased as he stepped forward.

On her side of the room, Sonya choked up her grip on the lance she held, holding it close to one end. Then with a wild yell she jumped up and over the guard who faced her, landing on her feet behind him. She passed the lance in front of the guard's throat, then grasped the free end of the weapon in her left hand, with her arms crossed behind the guard's head. Then she put her knee in the small of the guard's back, and pulled.

The guard arched backward under the force of Sonya's attack. The center of her lance forced itself up under the guard's helmet, tight against the creature's throat. The guard tried in vain to break the hold. Sonya evaded its grabs and kicks and held the lance in place until its struggles slowed.

At last the creature hung limp in her grasp. She let it fall to the floor, then turned to see what was going on with her two companions.

Liu Kang, meanwhile, had seized the discarded lance of his first opponent. He held it out with both hands in front of him parallel to the ground. The metal shone at both ends, blade and spike,

with the center of the lance made of polished wood. Liu sprang upward, his right knee rising as he smashed down with the lance, and the wooden shaft broke across his thigh. Then he tossed the broken pieces upward, allowing them to spin, and caught them again, one in each hand, holding each by the wood close to the splintered end.

He had a weapon in each hand now, and he spun them in fast figure eights before him, the air whistling with the speed of the movements. Grinning, he fixed his eyes on the eyes of the guard, and took a springing step forward.

Johnny Cage tossed his head to throw the sweat from his eyes. He feinted at the nearest guard, then drove the center of his lance into the forehead armor of the next. Johnny spun again, looking for his third opponent, when he saw that one fall backward seemingly on its own. A lance had smashed across the backs of both of its knees. As it fell, the lance smashed down again, taking it in the head. The guard hit the floor hard, and lay still.

There stood Liu, a part of the lance in each hand, grinning.

Johnny spun again, and saw another guard, who until that moment had been fighting him, now lying on its back on the floor. Sonya stood beside it, leaning on her spear.

“Leave one for me,” Johnny said.

He hooked the head of his lance on the shoulder of the wounded guard. He dragged the creature out of position, then suddenly reversed the direction of his swing. The heavy head of Johnny’s lance struck the guard beneath the point of its jaw, where the helmet joined the body armor. The guard flew backward, crumpled, and lay still.

Johnny straightened up and looked about him. The torches in the cavern were still burning, but now only the three humans remained standing.

“Just like I like ’em,” Sonya said, surveying the damage. Six guards lay unmoving among the stalagmites. “Dumb and ugly.”

“Piece of cake,” Johnny agreed.

Liu was going from one fallen guard to the next, nudging each one with his foot. Now he turned to stare at Sonya and Johnny in disbelief. “A piece of cake you say?”

Johnny shrugged. “Well, it was easy for me.” Liu still looked dubious, and in a sudden explosion of frustration, Johnny continued, “What *is* it with you, man? We’re standing, they’re not! What more do you want?”

As if in answer, someone nearby began to clap in slow, steady applause. Johnny turned toward the source of the sound.

Rayden sat on the stone stairway leading up out of Goro’s throne room. “Very impressive,” the God of Lightning said. “Congratulations.”

He stopped clapping and pointed back into the shadows of the cavern. Johnny followed the gesture. The darkness was alive with moving reflections of torchlight – and with more guards, dozens of them, all bearing lances and encased in organic armor.

“Now tell me,” Rayden asked, “what do the three of you intend to do about *them*?”

The human companions exchanged glances of resignation and turned to face the oncoming guards.

Then Rayden got up from his place on the steps. Calmly, he walked over to stand between the humans and the host of guards. He held up a warning finger.

“Remember,” he said. “To attack, other than in a recorded and entered Mortal Kombat, is forbidden to all creatures of Outworld.”

Still glowering at the humans, the guards stepped back.

“This is the way out,” Rayden said. And slowly he led the three humans away from the massed ranks of Outworld warriors, out of the caverns and up toward the open night.

Out on the torchlit fighting field, Art Lean faced the last of his four opponents, the man still held the knives up in a defensive cross, but he was otherwise nearly immobile. He was kneeling on the grass, and seemed hurt. Not as badly hurt as the other three, perhaps; they lay unconscious where they had fallen.

“I’m really sorry that I can’t stay and help you and your friends,” Art said. “But you have to understand, I’m tired after my long journey to get here, and I need to get some sleep.”

“Come on, you son of a bitch, I ain’t afraid of you,” the knife-wielder snarled. “This fight ain’t over yet!”

“You’re mistaken,” Art said.

His left foot snapped forward, between the raised knives, taking the man just below the ribs. The fellow was knocked backward and away with his arms flung wide. The two knives flew off into the dark.

Art bowed to his fallen opponent, then turned to collect his shoes and socks and his overnight back. That done, he looked around the field again.

“I wonder where the sleeping places are?” he asked aloud. “I wasn’t kidding about needing to get some rest.”

The entrance to the great tunnel was bathed in starlight as Liu, Johnny, and Sonya emerged, led by Rayden. They stopped as soon as they entered the garden outside the gate to the underground throne room of the Prince of Shokan.

“Now you have seen what you’ll be facing in the tournament,” Rayden said, looking closely at the three.

“You mean Goro?” Johnny asked.

“And Shang Tsung,” Rayden replied. “And the guards.”

“Will Shang Tsung fight in the tournament?” Liu wanted to know.

“If he chooses,” Rayden replied. The pale starlight made the garden seem a ghostly silver, with deep shadows forming inky pools between the shrubberies. Rayden himself appeared as a spectral form in the dimness. “As a former champion he has that right. And he’s far more dangerous than Goro. His demon power comes from the souls of vanquished warriors. To fight Shang Tsung is to face not one, but a legion of adversaries.” The God of Lightning turned to look directly at Liu. “Remember that.”

“Then how can we win?” Sonya asked. Her shoulders were stiff with tension.

“Goro can be killed,” Rayden replied, turning directly to face the Special Forces officer. “Shang Tsung’s power can be destroyed by mortal men and women. You can overcome any adversary, no matter how bizarre their powers may seem. There is always a way. Only one thing can defeat you: your own fear.”

“Who says we’re afraid?” Johnny challenged.

“Who says you are not? You must first face your fears if you are to conquer them,” Rayden said. “You, Johnny, are afraid people will think you’re a fake. So you’ll rush into any fight to prove you’re not. You’ll fight bravely enough, but foolishly, carelessly, without thinking. And you’ll be beaten.”

Rayden turned to Sonya. “You, Sonya,” he said, “are afraid to admit that even you sometimes need help. If you are afraid to trust, you will lose.”

“And what about me?” Liu asked.

“You fear your own destiny. You already fled it once, when you went to America. And now that fear has brought you guilt for the death of your brother.”

“I am responsible for Chan’s death,” Liu stated simply.

“No!” Rayden all but shouted, eyes blazing. “Every mortal is responsible for his own destiny! Chan believed this. Why can’t you?”

“I’ve tried,” Liu said. “I can’t.”

“Then know this,” Rayden said. “Despair is the most dangerous fear of all. Guilt over the past. Dread of the future. These are your enemies.”

He turned to address the three as a group. “I know all this. And so does Shang Tsung.”

“How?” Liu asked.

“He can peer into your souls and use the fear he sees there against you. Tomorrow the tournament begins. You must be prepared!”

Chapter Ten

Art Lean rose from the futon on which he had been sleeping. He felt rested and refreshed.

The early sunrise tinted the translucent walls of the little house in which he slept a delicate shade of pink. The dark wood of the framing made gentle traceries among the white panels.

Art rolled to his feet and performed some simple stretching exercised. He rolled his shoulders forward and back, flexing his arms. Then he lowered himself to the floor in a complete split, and bowed forward until his palms were against the floor. He remained in that position, feeling his tendons relax and his muscles grow limber.

It was good. He was ready.

Art returned to his feet in a forward somersault and picked up a goblet from a low enameled table which stood at his bedside. The pitcher beside it held clear, sweet water. Art drank some, then opened his small overnight bag. He removed his silk fighting uniform from the bag and put it on. He wrapped his black belt around his waist, cinching it tight. That done, he turned, and slid open the door.

The sight which greeted him was calm and beautiful. The air was mist-cool. The grass was damp but firm under his bare feet.

Art threw back his shoulders and breathed in the cool air. It held a slight salt tang from the sea, but it was pure. Not a hint of pollution. He breathed in deeply again. Yes, the top of the island was about a mile up. Good.

“I wonder where a man might find breakfast around here?” he asked himself, walking in what he believed was the direction of the Great Hall. At that moment he heard the crash of a huge gong somewhere off to his right. Art turned toward the sound and was surprised to see one of the monks standing nearly at his shoulder.

The monk had arrived silently. Now he bowed low, beckoned to Art to follow him, and walked off toward a grove of trees.

“I guess breakfast is that way,” Art said. What he found, though, when he passed through the screening trees, was a field in which fighters were gathering, each conducted by a monk.

Art saw Johnny and Sonya arrive together, led by a single brown-robed figure.

“Oh, Johnny, Johnny, Johnny,” Art said to himself. “Did you get lucky last night?”

Art looked more closely at Sonya. Her mouth was set in a humorless line. There were worry lines between Johnny’s eyebrows.

“Nope,” Art concluded, “probably not.”

Another gong sounded. Shang Tsung stepped forward, a line of monks pacing him on either side. Sub-Zero and Scorpion, the two ninjas, kept their usual pace just behind him.

The demon sorcerer walked to a throne overlooking the field and sat. He opened a large green fan and held it in his lap. The low buzz of conversation from the gathered fighters slowed, then ceased.

Shang stood.

“From this moment forward,” Shang said, “my island will be your battleground.” Shang held the fan above his head, then swept it down again before him. “Let Mortal Kombat begin!”

The sorcerer seated himself. As Shang Tsung settled onto his golden throne, behind the line of monks and another line of guards, Liu saw a monk come up to him and bow.

“Don’t tell me,” Liu said. “Let me guess. I’m up for a bout. Right?”

By way of an answer, the monk turned and escorted Liu to one of the fighting rings that dotted the plain.

The torches that had burned around the rings the night before had been replaced with silk banners rippling in the gentle wind. Liu shucked off his shirt and removed his shoes, stacking them neatly beside one of the poles marking a corner of the ring, then slipped between the ropes and in.

The interior of the ring was filled with soft bark chips, which gave his feet a firm grip. There he waited.

With a loud cry, another warrior bounced into the ring, leaping high above the ropes to clear them, rather than slipping in between as Liu had done.

The Outworld fighter was shorter than Liu, but far more powerfully built. Thick ropes of muscle lay on his arms and legs, and his abdomen was flat and hard above the simple twist of the loincloth he wore.

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Liu bowed to the newcomer. The Outworld bowed back. Then, without pause or warning, the stranger began his attack.

The shorter man flung himself forward at Liu, coming to rest on his hands, feet in the air. Those feet began to whirl with blinding speed, kicks coming from right and left at Liu's heat, torso, and legs. Liu blocked the first blow, but the rest came too fast. To evade them Liu jumped high above and over his opponent, landing beyond the man's reach. He threw himself to the ground and spun, his legs scissoring out to take the shorter man's arms.

But the Outworld fighter hadn't remained in one place. He fell toward Liu, seeking to pin him beneath his weight. Liu rolled aside, then performed an elbow strike as his opponent came near.

The Outworlder didn't appear to feel the strike. To Liu, it felt like he had struck a concrete wall.

Once again, the Outworlder took his odd position and began to kick.

If that's the way he wants it, Liu thought, *I can stay out of his reach long enough for him to tire himself.*

Liu swayed forward, attracting a vicious flurry of blows, then leaned back, allowing them to miss. But the Outworlder was clever, too. He rolled toward Liu, leapt into the air, and made a forward snap kick at Liu's head.

Liu blocked with his crossed wrists before him, trapping the other man's ankle. Then he grabbed the extended foot and twisted it before the other could withdraw his leg.

The Outworlder fell to the ground, catching himself on his hands, and sprang backward at Liu with a reverse fist strike.

Liu ducked and drove the heel of his hand into the other's elbow as the blow flew by.

The two closed. Liu's high punches were blocked by his opponent, but his reaping circle kick landed. The Outworlder grunted with pain.

"Ah, so you can be hurt," Liu said. Liu's superior training and endurance were becoming important now. The other man was still flinging kicks and punches with great force, but he was noticeably slowing down.

Liu delivered a one-two-one combination of kicks to the man's chest and belly, retreating before the counter-attack could come.

The Outworld fighter was slowing, but he was still formidable. He came to the attack, springing hand over hand in a blur of motion. Liu was forced to retreat, unable to punch or kick effectively.

Yet if Liu was unable to attack effectively, he could still block, so none of the other man's blows landed. The attack ended with the Outworlder facing the ropes on the far side of the ring. Liu reached in and grabbed the fellow's wrist, jerking it sharply downward. He smashed a knee strike to the small of the other's back at the kidneys, then a heel strike to the man's throat.

The Outworlder fell on his back. Liu leapt up and landed on his knees on the other's chest.

The fight was over.

Liu retreated, staying in stance, eyes alertly scanning to left and right for other opponents. There were none. Instead all he saw was the monk outside the ring.

The monk opened a scroll and, with a quill pen, made a quick stroke on the paper. Then the monk closed his scroll, bowed, and departed. Liu looked over at his opponent. The man was still lying where Liu had left him.

"I guess that's it for this one," Liu said.

He bowed to the still form lying on the bark and slipped away between the ropes.

Johnny walked through the tournament grounds. Bouts were in progress on all sides of him. His own first round hadn't been much of a challenge. He'd been matched against a limber creature with thin, spidery arms and legs. The creature had seemed more impressed with its own flexibility than interested in landing effective strikes, and Johnny had dealt with it through an easy combination of leg holds and punches.

Now Johnny was looking for Sonya. He wanted to see her fight, but more than that he wanted to cheer her on. He had spotted Art Lean already. Art had been fighting a green, carapaced Outworlder armed with a pair of sais. Art himself had used a set of nunchucks. As Johnny watched, Art had twisted one sai away from his opponent by catching it with the chain of his nunchucks. Art threw the metal weapon out of the ring. The bout hadn't lasted long after that.

Up ahead, Johnny spotted Sonya. She was still in uniform, but had stripped off the bulky jacket and pistol belt and laid them outside the ring.

The ring here was made of flagstones set among the short grass of the rest of the field. Sonya stood relaxed in her uniform trousers, the outline of her ILN visible beneath her Army-issue T-shirt. She still wore her tightly-laced combat boots.

Facing Sonya was an Asian woman with long black hair. Wherever the woman's flesh wasn't covered with shimmering green silk, it was covered with tattoos showing leaping tigers and coiling dragons.

The woman swayed slightly from side to side and spun two flashing half-moon daggers around her body in a dazzling display of skill. Her knives made a whirling sound as they split the air, and the early morning light glittered from their edges. They made a cage of living steel around the woman, which it would seem impossible for anyone to penetrate.

Sonya watched, bare-handed, as the woman demonstrated the knives' effectiveness.

"That's Jade," Johnny said, as he came up, catching Sonya's eye. "Tough girl."

Sonya looked through Johnny as if he wasn't there. Then she turned her attention back to her opponent. The display was over; the woman took a ready stance, her weight on her back leg, one of the half-moon daggers held behind and above her head, the other at waist-level before her.

The Special Forces soldier took a step forward, then bowed low toward the woman with the daggers. After holding the deep bow for a moment, Sonya stood again, feet together, looking calmly at her opponent.

The Asian woman pulled herself in from her guard position and returned the respectful acknowledgement. When Jade was at the deepest part of the bow, Sonya kicked her in the head with the toe of her left combat boot.

The daggers flew from the tattooed woman's hands as she was knocked upright then over so that she lay on her back, eyes open, blood oozing from her mouth, nose, and ears. Sonya turned and walked back toward Johnny Cage.

"Not that tough," she said.

A little farther away, Shang Tsung was waiting for her. "Excellent," Shang said. "Flawless victory."

Sonya scowled and stalked past the sorcerer.

Liu had not rested long after his first bout before a hooded monk found him.

"So soon?" Liu asked, but he neither expected nor received an answer. The monk led him to a raised platform of wood, longer than it was wide. No guardrails prevented a fighter from taking a nasty fall from its sides. Liu climbed up the ladder at one end and began to warm up, stretching his muscles while calming himself through meditation.

He turned when he heard a rustle of cloth from the other end of the platform. He was surprised to find that the opponent he faced was Princess Kitana.

Kitana eyed Liu coldly. Here in the light of the sun she didn't look as soft and alluring as she had in the garden the day before, or at the high table in the feast hall, or in the caverns of Shokan where she had tried to save Liu and his friends from the guards. Instead her face was stern, and she moved carefully, keeping her body centered and her weight balanced. Her technique, Liu reflected, was excellent.

The monk led Liu and Kitana to the center of the wooden platform. There they bowed to one another and started to circle.

Kitana was the first to attack with a jabbing punch. Liu blocked the blow to one side with his forearm, but didn't counterattack. Her next attack was quicker and came from an unexpected direction. She swept her leg behind his in a reaping kick. Liu jumped over the attacking leg and moved back instead of moving in to make his own attack.

The two fighters continued to circle. Kitana made a series of jabs to Liu's head, but he evaded them, never taking the opportunity to make an attack of his own, even when an opening appeared. Liu was unwilling to hurt someone who, he was certain, was on his own side.

Another jab punched toward his head, but this time it was a feint that masked the motion of her legs sweeping toward him. He tried to leap away, but she anticipated his action and took him down. Liu landed on his back with Princess Kitana on top of him, pinning his shoulders down.

"If you don't fight with all your heart," she hissed in his ear, "there is no hope!"

The monk was approaching to give the victory to Kitana. Liu realized that if her were eliminated now from the tournament he would lose all hope of fighting against the person who had killed Chan. He rolled and twisted, his hand flashing out to take Kitana in the side. The blow drove the breath from her lungs, forcing her to loosen her grip.

Liu threw her off and sprang to his feet.

Now he fought in earnest, but the princess was a good fighter, as good as anyone Liu had ever faced. A second time she put him on his back, his shoulders forced into the rough wood of the platform.

"This is the only way I could find to speak with you," she whispered in his ear, even as his muscles groaned with agony under her grip. "To win your next match, use the element which brings life."

Liu got his hand beneath her chin and forced it up and back, his fingers digging toward her eyes. Her grip broke, and Liu rolled to his feet. He looked up just in time to see a flying side kick aimed at his head. His only chance was to dive under it and roll. The move brought him to the side of the platform. He stood for a fraction of a second teetering on the edge, before he could spin and take a step back toward the center. As he did so, he saw Shang Tsung standing nearby, watching the fight.

He wants to see me defeated, and he wants to see Kitana destroyed, Liu thought. No matter who wins this match, he thinks that he is the winner.

Kitana was facing Liu again.

Liu took a step toward her, then another. He launched a punch toward her head. She blocked it and counter-punched. Liu used an outside block to keep it from touching him, his other hand grasping her wrist. Then he leapt, snapping out his right leg so that the ball of his foot took her in the belly. He let the momentum of his kick turn him around before he landed, still holding her wrist.

He bent forward, propelling her over his shoulder. She landed face down, full-length on the platform. Liu fell on top of her, pinning her wrists together with one hand while raising her head with his forearm held against her throat. She was pinned and helpless.

"Remember my words," she managed to whisper before the monk approached.

The monk marked down Liu's victory on his scroll, the plumed head of the pen wagging as he wrote.

Liu stood and backed off to his end of the platform. Princess Kitana rolled to her feet, then climbed down the ladder. She walked by the place where Shang Tsung stood. Shang bowed to her with mock courtesy as she walked by, but she did not acknowledge him.

Liu also hurried from the platform and began to follow Kitana. She was far ahead of him, her dignified but rapid pace covering the ground with a smoothness that made it hard for Liu to believe she'd been in the fighting ring with him only a few moments before. Her four ladies-in-waiting took station around her as she walked, surrounding her with a wall of colorful silk.

Liu broke into a run, hoping to catch up with her.

At that moment two palace guards, long teeth gleaming under their bone helmets, stepped forward to block his way. Before Liu could deal with them, Shang Tsung approached.

The sorcerer's eyes were burning. "I cannot allow you to... bother... Princess Kitana."

Far off, Kitana entered the woods. Liu watched, frustrated, as she vanished into its darkness with her maids around her.

"Tell me, Liu," Shang continued, "why do you not fight for me, instead of against me? You have seen how weak Rayden is here on my island. Here I could give you great honor and great responsibility."

"All I wish to do here is fight the one who killed my brother," Liu said, disgusted.

"Be very careful what you ask for, young Liu," Shang said. "In Mortal Kombat, challenges cannot be refused without the greatest penalties. If you were to challenge someone, that one *would* fight you. And – I speak to you as a friend, now – you are not ready for the fight you so much desire."

"I have no use for such friends," Liu began, but then he stopped.

Shang Tsung had vanished.

Elsewhere on the field, a brown-hooded monk approached Johnny Cage.

“Time for my next bout,” Johnny said to no one in particular. He followed the monk to another ring. This one was of grass, separated from the other parts of the field by a circle of trees. Orange and yellow paper lanterns hung from the trees, giving the place a festive appearance.

Then the monk stood aside, and Johnny could see who his opponent was to be.

Shang’s ninja, Scorpion.

Chapter Eleven

The ninja Scorpion was dressed as always in yellow and black. A mask covered his face.

"I remember you," Johnny said.

The actor bowed briefly to his opponent – always keeping his eyes raised, however. He recalled all too well Sonya's victory over Jade only a few moments before, and had no intention of following in the path of her unfortunate opponent.

Scorpion began to circle in the arena between the trees, his hands weaving in front of him. Johnny approached, keeping his center of gravity low. When he got within striking range, he spun, a kick launched high at Scorpion's head.

The ninja blocked up and out with his left forearm and responded with a counterpunch, low, toward Johnny's head.

Johnny blocked, redirecting the force of the blow down, but found that the ninja had countered his block, taking his arm into a bone-breaker. Johnny's only hope was to accept the throw.

He hit the ground hard, but rolled to his feet and resumed his stance. The ground was rocky, and sharp spikes of flint protruded between the mossy hummocks.

"One thing movie work *will* teach a guy," Johnny muttered, "and that's how to fall."

He moved to the attack again, but more cautiously. He knew that he would have to keep Scorpion busy. If the ninja was able to bring his special talent to bear, things might go hard with Johnny indeed.

Johnny ducked a high kick, grabbing Scorpion's leg as it came over him. He pulled, and Scorpion hit the ground. Johnny leapt to deliver a crushing blow, but the ninja rolled out of the way and sprang at Johnny.

The two fighters met in midair. Johnny blocked a side-hand strike to his throat, and Scorpion blocked Johnny's punch to his breastbone. They landed again with neither man having an advantage.

I have to win, Johnny thought. *Against Scorpion, there is no such thing as a minor defeat.*

A monk stood before Liu. The hooded man bowed to Liu, then turned and walked away. Liu followed.

The monk paced slowly along a gravel path. Liu stayed close behind. The path twisted among the fighting rings, then went past a stone gate to a courtyard full of flowers.

“Where are you taking me?” Liu asked after the monk had gone beyond the rings where other combats were taking place.

The monk didn’t reply. Soon enough, though, Liu found out the answer. They emerged from a small grove to stand before the Great Hall. The hall’s golden roof glistened in the morning sun.

In full daylight, Liu could see that the Great Hall was set halfway into the side of the mountain. As Liu watched, a coolie carrying a pair of wooden buckets on a shoulder yoke entered the Great Hall from one side, his back bent under the heavy load.

Liu followed the monk along the path, then up the stone steps which led into the Great Hall. The coolie had vanished, but Liu saw that his buckets remained – left there probably for the cleanup crew that would be scrubbing the hall after last night’s feast. The tables and benches had already been removed, taken apart, and stacked along the sides of the hall like high wooden walls. The central area was larger than Liu had thought it would’ve been, now that he was alone in it – alone, that is, except for the silent monk.

“My match is here?” Liu asked.

In answer the monk bowed and stepped back. Liu stood for a moment, then turned to look around the hall.

At first he saw no one. Then he heard a sound, a rising and falling sound like the deepest note of a vast organ playing almost too softly to be heard. Liu turned toward the sound. A stairway was set into the wall, where it led back into the hillside. A figure was standing at the top of the stairs, a silhouette against the flaring torches behind him. The figure moved forward slowly. Down the steps it came. The light struck its face.

Then Liu recognized him: one of Shang’s ninjas.

“Sub-Zero,” Liu said.

The ninja approached. Liu took his stance. And the fight began.

Liu began it with a leg sweep, which the ninja blocked. But the leg sweep was only the first in a combination of hand and foot movements. The block that stopped Liu's sweep distracted the ninja, leaving him open to the double-handed strike Liu threw at him. The double blow stopped the ninja and rocked him back.

Liu controlled his breathing and focused all his mental and physical energies on the situation at hand. He forgot about the tournament, about Shang Tsung, about the hall, about Kitana. While he concentrated on Sub-Zero, he even forgot about Chan.

The fight ranged up and down the length of the Great Hall. Liu used all of his skill and strength. He was faster than the ninja. Just a little faster. The battle was going his way. Every time he threw Sub-Zero, the ninja recovered more slowly.

Then a series of low kicks drove Liu back, blocking. None of the kicks had hurt him, none had even come close, but he noticed that he was slowing down. The question *why?* entered his relaxed state of nomindedness, breaking his concentration.

Liu stopped in a defensive stance. Why was he slowing? He shivered and shivered again, as from a sudden blast of cold. A glowing blue aura surrounded Sub-Zero. The answer came to Liu all at once, in a mental picture of the frozen guard the night before and the way it had shattered.

The unnatural cold was sapping my strength Liu thought. And any moment now, Sub-Zero would use his power to freeze me solid.

Johnny Cage was fighting hard for his life on the rocky ground amid the trees. Scorpion had nailed him with some good shots, but Johnny had tagged him back, returning each blow with interest. Now they stood eyeing each other, both breathing hard.

"You're worse than an assistant director on a deadline," Johnny said, panting. "What does it take to make you fall down?"

The ninja just hissed at him and raised his right hand, the open palm facing toward Johnny.

"Oh hell," Johnny said. He had a pretty good idea of what was coming next.

Sure enough, Scorpion thrust his hand forward. The skin of his palm split in a vertical line, and a long, wicked creature in the shape of a spike emerged from his hand. The creature's jaw snapped open and shut. Again the ninja hissed.

“I don’t suppose Rayden’ll pull my buns out of the fire this time,” Johnny muttered and brought his hands up before him in a cross-blocking position.

In the blink of an eye the creature flew from the ninja’s palm, straight toward Johnny. The spike was attached to a long umbilical cord, glistening brownish-pink like wet leather, leading back to Scorpion. The creature’s jaws opened, and its teeth glistened as it drove inward.

As fast as the spike-creature was, Johnny’s reflexes were faster. At the last moment, Johnny ducked, and the creature hurtled past him.

But before Johnny could use the opportunity to launch his own attack on Scorpion, the spike-creature turned and streaked back toward him. This time Johnny leapt straight up. Again the creature missed, but its leathery umbilical cord went between the actor’s legs, tangling them.

The living spike shot fifty feet into the air. The cord around Johnny’s legs yanked his feet out from under him. He hit the ground hard and lay on his back momentarily stunned.

The spike was a faint dot high above him, almost lost in the branches of the trees. For an instant it seemed to hang there, then it flipped over and arrowed downward, straight at Johnny.

Johnny rolled to his left. A second later the spike hit the ground where his body had been. It drove into the turf and buried itself completely out of sight.

“Missed me,” Johnny said, sitting up.

Then the creature and its cord exploded out of the ground, clods of dirt flying in every direction. Johnny didn’t waste a moment. He flung himself at the creature, gripping it just behind the spike in both hands. His palms burned as the fast-moving cord slid through his grip, but he hung on. He rolled toward a tree, and threw a round turn on a thick branch. The spike stopped and swung back toward Johnny, but it was caught, trapped by the entangling branch.

Johnny looked down. A stone protruded from the ground. A long shard of flint – with sharp edges.

He grabbed the spike-creature’s umbilical cord between the branch and the point where it emerged from the ground. Being careful to avoid the creature’s snapping teeth, he pulled the cord against the flint. He pulled harder, sawing the tough material with the sharp edge of the stone.

Then all at once the cord broke. A thin, purple fluid oozed from the cut ends. The spike-creature hung limp, mouth open, eyes staring, long reptilian tongue hanging down. A drop of clear fluid fell from its open mouth.

Scorpion howled in rage or pain – Johnny couldn't be sure which. Then the yellow-clad ninja raised his left hand to shoot another spike.

"Hey," Johnny said. "I've already seen your rope trick. Show me something new, something..."

He ran toward Scorpion. As soon as he was close enough, he leapt into the air and delivered his shadow kick, the move that had made him a star in his first action film.

To an observer, the shadow kick looked as if Johnny had elongated and faded, as if he were a blur of motion caught in a strobe light. The only sound was the rushing of wind and the loud crack as Johnny's foot contacted the ninja's head.

Scorpion fell unconscious.

"...like that," Johnny finished, as he pulled out his dark glasses and slipped them on. Only then did he notice that Art Lean was watching from the edge of the arena.

"Hey, man," Art said. "I saw it but I still don't believe it. How did you do that?"

"Just a little trick I know," Johnny said. "After this is all over, I'll teach it to you, if you like."

"You've done that one in the movies," Art said, "but I always figured that it was the special effects guys doing their thing. Man, no one had ever better call you a fake again where *I* can hear it."

Johnny Cage just grinned, and the monk marked the victory on his scroll.

In the Great Hall, Liu Kang regarded Sub-Zero with dismay.

Liu already knew how fast the blast of cold could reach him. There wasn't time for him to get to Sub-Zero from where he was standing, in order to attack first. Liu took a step back. As he did so, he accidentally kicked over one of the buckets of water the coolie had left behind in the Great Hall.

The water froze as it spilled across the floor. Far across the hall, Liu could see Kitana standing at the top of a set of stairs, watching him. The princess's words came back to him.

"Use the force which brings life..." Liu whispered. Suddenly the answer came to him. "Water!"

Liu picked up the second pail of water, still attached to the carrying yoke. He swung it around and around his head, faster and faster. The centrifugal force grew. He could hardly hold the bucket. He let go, and the bucket flew toward Sub-Zero, spilling a trail of water as it tumbled through the air.

The ninja loosed his cold blast. When the blast struck the water, all the trailing droplets coalesced, absorbing the freezing attack the ninja had meant for Liu. Their motion through the air continued, but now the droplets were frozen into a long spear of solid ice, flying point-first toward the blue-clad fighter.

Before the ninja could move out of the way, the icicle struck, piercing his chest and pinning him to one of the columns of the Great Hall. Sub-Zero looked down with disbelief at the icy shaft transfixing his body. Slowly, from the center out, he himself froze into a glittering sculpture of solid ice. His head was the last part to freeze, a look of rage and disbelief still caught in his open eyes.

Liu looked away from the frozen ninja, and saw that Princess Kitana was still watching. She turned and vanished through a doorway, deep into the side of the mountain.

The monk marked down the victory on his scroll.

Torches flared in Goro's underground throne room. The Shokan prince sat in his throne, wrapped in his cape, a golden cup of wine in one of his four hands. From somewhere outside of the room he could hear the beat of a massive drum.

A long shadow fell across the room, followed a moment later by a figure dressed in long silk robes: the demon sorcerer Shang Tsung. This time the sorcerer was alone.

Goro looked up. He noted the absence of the two ninjas, Sub-Zero and Scorpion, and drew his own conclusions.

"Is it time?" the prince asked. "So soon?"

"Yes," Shang replied. His dark eyes flared with bottomless flames. "We've let these humans win enough."

Goro rose slowly from his throne. His long hair was bound behind him in a ponytail that hung past his shoulders. His eyes flashed with expectation.

"At last," he said to Shang Tsung. "Now you will have yet another realm with which to play." The half-dragon champion didn't bother waiting for an answer, but swept past the sorcerer on his way into the maze of the cavern realm of Shokan.

Behind him, Shang Tsung merely smiled.

On the surface of the island night was falling fast. Only a day had passed since the Feast of Heroes, but to Sonya Blade the time seemed far longer. The whole day had been filled with fighting. So far, Sonya thought, she'd been a better – or a luckier – fighter than her opponents.

She looked around. Both Johnny and Liu seem to have made it this far, too, but the Great Hall was far less crowded than it had been the night before. That didn't look good.

"Think they're going to feed us again?" Johnny asked.

Liu shook his head. "I don't see any tables set up."

Up on a balcony, Sonya saw Shang Tsung sitting in a place of honor, a fan in his hands. As she looked up, Shang looked down. For a moment their eyes met. He smiled chillingly, and Sonya felt a shiver run up her spine. Shang held her with his eyes for a moment more before she was able to look away.

Drums began to beat in the hall, and a weird skirl of flutes pulsed above them. From the outer doors a group of guards pressed inside, using their lances to rudely push the crowd aside, clearing the central area of the Great Hall.

The huge drums beat in slow cadence as a massive shape darkened the door of the hall. From outside, his head nearly touching the top of the portal, Goro entered the Great Hall. His crimson cape ruffled in the breeze as he strode down the length of the hall. At last he stopped in front of Shang Tsung. The giant bowed to the sorcerer, then turned and removed his cape. The crowd gasped as he stood there, muscular body revealed, his four arms stretching out to the ceiling.

On the balcony above, Shang Tsung stood.

“The first day of Mortal Kombat has ended,” the sorcerer said into the sudden quiet. “Or nearly so. One fighter from the Realm of Earth has won more bouts than any other. Here, he will have the opportunity to face the champion of Outworld for the prize. Should the champion of Earth win, then the Realm of Earth is safe. Should he lose...” Here Shang Tsung paused to sweep his eyes over the assembled fighters. “...then Mortal Kombat will continue tomorrow.”

“Who’s the champion?” Johnny whispered to Liu.

“It isn’t me, that’s all I know,” Liu whispered back. “At least, not yet.”

The drums beat again. A monk paced through the hall. A solitary human fighter walked behind him.

Art Lean followed the silent, black-hooded monk to the cleared area in the center of the Great Hall. Art caught Johnny’s eye, and walked over to where the actor stood among the circle of fighters waiting outside the ring.

“Hey, Johnny, any advice?” Art said. His tone was light and bantering, but his face was serious.

Johnny looked over to where the huge Outworld champion was stretching, preparing himself for the bout, and tried not to show the dismay he felt.

“Get a note from your mom and call in sick?” he suggested.

“Too late for that, I’m afraid,” Art said. “I’ll just have to give it my best.”

“Your best is damned good,” Johnny said. “You take him, and we can all go home.”

“You got it, my man,” Art said, laughing. He turned back to face Goro.

A silent monk paced into the center of the cleared circle and held up his hand. Art and Goro bowed to one another. Then the monk withdrew and the fight began.

Art and Goro circled one another slowly and cautiously at first, each sizing the other up. Then, without warning, Art gave a cry and launched a full attack, kicking and punching. The huge Shokan warrior didn’t bother to block or respond, taking the punishment. Art dropped back and resumed a defensive stance, breathing heavily.

“Art Lean! Art Lean!” Johnny shouted. The crowd picked up the chant, cheering Art on.

“It isn’t fair,” Sonya whispered under cover of the noise. “Art’s been fighting all day; Goro is fresh and rested.”

“When demons are involved,” Liu whispered back, “‘fair’ just isn’t in it.”

Again Art moved to the attack. He leapt, spinning into the air and lashed his leg out in a terrific kick. His foot took Goro in the center of his chest, staggering him, driving him back a step, making him bend over.

“Art Lean!” the crowd cheered. “Art Lean!”

Goro bellowed with rage, his voice shaking the rafters. Then he crouched, and moved to the attack.

Art was hard-pressed to block the quadruple attack of the Outworld champion’s four fists. They seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. He attacked again, but Goro’s massive arms and legs blocked him. The four arms, moving almost too fast to see, were all around him. Art took one step back, then another.

Now Goro was stalking Art, following him as he gave ground. The crowd grew silent, watching fascinated as Goro moved, huge yet graceful, not hurrying, yet not letting Art get a moment to rest or to regain his stance.

Art seemed to hesitate, then launched another kick like the one which had staggered Goro before. But Johnny could see that his friend was tiring.

“Art!” Johnny shouted. “Keep your distance!”

But it was too late. Fast – blindingly fast – Goro’s lower arms snaked out and caught Art Lean in midair. Art struck out with his own arms, trying for Goro’s eyes, but his reach was too short. Goro held him suspended.

Then Goro struck with his upper arms, driving the huge fists into Art’s head again and again. Art sagged in Goro’s grip. The giant paused. He turned toward Shang Tsung and looked up expectantly.

On the balcony, the demon sorcerer had risen to his feet. He looked at Goro standing beneath him and at Art Lean hanging like a rag doll in the giant’s arms.

Shang smiled and pointed his fan at Goro.

“Finish him!” he said.

Chapter Twelve

“Finish him!” Shang Tsung commanded.

Goro looked up at the sorcerer, standing on the balcony of the Great Hall. The entire room was silent. Even the drumbeats had stilled.

Goro looked down at the still form clutched in his lower arms. “You fought well,” he said, almost sadly.

With increasing speed and force, he pummeled Art Lean’s helpless body again and again with his upper fists. Flecks of blood dotted Goro’s torso. At last he stopped, and knelt down on one knee before the demon sorcerer.

Raising Art’s body, Goro bent his head and closed his eyes.

A sound started in the room, low at first, then growing rapidly louder, a swirling, screaming noise, like thousands of creatures crying out in horror and pain. The torches in the Great Hall flickered and bent as a wind swept through. Tiny swirls of dust danced on the floor.

Something was rising from Art Lean’s body. A ghostly, ethereal form, it resembled Art himself. The transparent shape drifted slowly upward.

The dissonant chorus grew louder, the moaning almost too much to bear. Some of the fighters from Earth covered their ears to shut out the sound. The very stones of the Great Hall seemed to vibrate.

Shang Tsung reached out a hand toward Art Lean’s spirit as it rose from his battered body.

“Your soul is mine!” Shang cried, his voice rising even louder than the chorus of the damned.

The spirit twisted as with a wind, and began to drift toward Shang. It seemed to realize what was happening and clawed at the air, but to no avail. The sound was deafening now.

Art’s spirit was being sucked toward Shang Tsung’s face. A corner of the drifting vapor touched the demon sorcerer, and then it was gone, pulled inside Shang’s eye. Nothing remained. The hellish chorus grew fainter, the wind died. The torches again burned clear.

The Great Hall was silent, as if everyone were holding his breath. Shang sat back into his seat of honor.

“Ah,” Shang said at last, breaking the silence. His voice was full of satisfaction. “Flawless victory.”

The monk wrote it down on his scroll.

Goro put down Art Lean’s He picked up his cape and put it on with a swirling motion. Then the champion of Outworld stalked from the Great Hall, as the crowd of human fighters parted silently before him.

Johnny stepped forward toward Art Lean’s silent form. Sonya Blade and Liu Kang came with him. Above, in the balcony, Shang Tsung had vanished.

“Art,” Johnny began in a hoarse whisper.

Sonya knelt beside Art’s body. She checked for a pulse and breathing.

“Nothing,” she said. “I can’t do anything for him. Goro broke every bone in his body.

You’re seeing what Shang Tsung intends for all of us,” Liu said. “We must treat our friend now as we ourselves would wish to be treated.”

A monk approached, a bundle of white cloth in his hands. Johnny took it and with Liu and Sonya’s help wrapped Art’s body in the soft fabric. Blood tinged the white cloth as they wound it around the defeated fighter.

The other fighters from the Realm of Earth gathered around. Together they lifted Art’s body to their shoulders and paced from the Great Hall, the pallbearers in front, the rest carrying torches and following behind. A single drumbeat marked the cadence. They sought the flower garden where the statues of the champions of Mortal Kombat stood.

“There,” Johnny said, pointing. A new statue had been erected in the garden: Art Lean, laughing and full of life, carved in cold stone, standing on a pedestal. Beneath it, an empty grave yawned open.

Liu saw Rayden, coolie hat on his head, standing a little way apart from the funeral procession. The young fighter left his friends to make his way over to him.

“You could have stopped that,” Liu said, his voice fierce.

“I told you,” Rayden replied, “I cannot interfere.”

“That’s why I left the temple!” Liu exploded, suddenly angry. All of the emotion he had kept hidden since his brother died boiled to the surface. “All this mumbo jumbo about the power of reason and light. But where are you when we need you? Where is that power?”

Liu pointed at the knot of people lowering Art Lean into his grave. “*That’s* where reason and light get you!”

“The power is in you,” Rayden said, still calm. “If the gods decide men’s destiny, then there is no free will. No choice. In Outworld, the emperor makes every decision. You have only to obey, Is that what you want?”

He turned to go. Liu caught Rayden by the shoulder, turning him, and pointing again to the funeral procession.

“What choice did *he* have?” Liu demanded.

“He chose to fight and die a free man!” Rayden replied, his voice just as fierce as Liu’s had been. The God of Lightning’s eyes were blazing with cold blue fire. “If Outworld wins this tournament, no mortal man will ever have that choice again!”

“How can I defeat a... a sorcerer like Shang Tsung?” Liu asked. “I’m not my ancestor. You were right. I’m not ready!”

“The true warrior learns from his own experience,” Rayden said. “You have carved your own path to this place and this moment! Everything you need is within you now, Liu Kang. Unlock that power and you will win.”

“Win!” Liu exclaimed. “There is no winning here! Everything is stacked against us. Shang controls the contest. We *can’t* win.”

“And I say you can,” Rayden replied. “You must.”

Liu Kang shook his head and walked off into the dark, amid the silence beneath the trees, amid the fragrant flowers.

He sat with his back to a statue, looking out over the cliff, toward the stars so far away. The horizon was clear, the ocean far below unruffled.

“Now I know what this place is,” he said. “It’s a graveyard. The graveyard of all of humanity’s hopes. Each statue marks another defeat in Mortal Kombat.”

He sat cross-legged on the grass and, for the first time in years, began to meditate as he had been taught.

Liu meditated, and behind his closed eyes he saw a vision. Dawn was coming, the sun rising in splendor across the bay. The first rays turned the roof of the pagoda, the temple of Rayden, to golden fire.

The air was warm yet clear. Liu saw Chan, his brother, sweeping the flagstone courtyard.

Another man was present. Liu recognized him. Shang Tsung, the sorcerer.

“Chan! Watch out!” Liu shouted, but Chan didn’t hear him.

“Chan? Are you Chan?” the stranger said.

“Yes,” Chan replied. “That is me.”

“You think that you are to fight to defend the Earth,” the stranger said. “That is not to be.”

“Perhaps you are mistaken, honored one,” Chan said.

“I never make mistakes in that regard.” The man dropped into a fighting stance, his feet widely spaced, his hands floating at waist level before him.

“Run away!” Liu cried out. “You can’t fight him!”

But he was unable to move, unable to intervene. Neither Chan nor Shang seemed to notice his presence.

“So this is the way it is to be,” Chan said, bowing before taking his own stance.

“Regrettably, yes,” the demon replied. “Every man chooses his own path. You chose the wrong one.”

Chan remained in his defensive position. He seemed unwilling to strike first. Shang, however, had no such compunctions. He struck at Chan, kicking high to the side of his face. When Chan

moved to block the kick, Shang countered the block with almost contemptuous ease, skipping from foot to foot, changing directions as he attacked from both sides.

Chan was outclassed. Shang had greater skill, greater speed, greater determination. Liu's brother held up his hands in surrender, but the sorcerer ignored the gesture. Instead, he struck Chan again and again.

Liu could hear the chorus of the damned begin to sound, the swirling discord of the souls Shang Tsung had trapped. Chan staggered and fell. Shang stood above him, one hand reaching down toward the fallen man.

Misty and dark, the spirit emerged from Chan's body. Shang grasped the soul, pulling it in. The soul struggled, but nothing could save it now. The howling of spirits in pain grew louder.

Only then, as it was being absorbed into Shang's eye, did Chan's spirit look up. And it saw Liu watching in his meditation.

"Liu!" Chan screamed. Then he was gone, sucked into Shang Tsung to become one of his slaves.

Shang turned to where Liu stood watching, and reached out one taloned hand.

"You too are mine," the demon said.

Liu's eyes snapped open. He was sitting at the top of the cliff overlooking the ocean. Far away the sun was rising, huge and red, out of the morning mist.

Sonya Blade was walking out in the early morning light, lost in thought. Ahead, in the fog of daybreak, she spied a lone figure performing an intricate and impressive kata in the mist – a predetermined series of exercised practiced to develop smooth, fluid movement. The man was dressed in all black, and he was performing his kata with a long chain. The chain whirled around him, whistling in intricate patterns around his body.

Sonya stood for a moment, watching the man in awe as the chain spun around him. His technique was flawless. He struck again and again, in all directions, as if enemies surrounded him. His blocks turned easily into attacks, then again into blocks. Kicks and punches mingled with the chain's strikes as the kata increased in speed. It was beautiful. Sonya was unwilling to distract the master martial artist by speaking.

The sun rose higher, burning the mist away. The man was no longer a mere silhouette in the fog. Sonya looked more closely, unable to believe her eyes.

"Johnny?" Sonya said.

Johnny Cage stood on the edge of the cliff, chain in hand, working through the moves of his kata. Sweat glistened on his forehead, but his expression was calm and relaxed. Faster and faster he moved, until at last he froze in a perfect defensive stance, chain stretched from hand to hand above his head.

He held the pose for a moment, then drew his feet together and bowed to an imaginary opponent. Only then did he seem to notice Sonya standing there watching him. His face broke into the old, annoying grin.

"Go ahead, say it," Johnny told her. "You're impressed."

Sonya looked at him. He *was* very handsome, and his form in the kata had been excellent. The corners of her mouth began to turn up.

"Aha! Is that a smile?"

All at once Sonya was reminded why she thought Johnny was a pig.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Rayden was right," Johnny said. "I always charge into things without thinking first. So I was thinking. And this time I'm working on a strategy."

"A strategy?" Sonya said, her tone disbelieving.

"That's right," Johnny said. "Because otherwise, Goro will kill us off, one by one." He started a routine of stretching, to keep his muscles from kinking up after his workout.

With slowly dawning horror, Sonya realized what Johnny was saying. "So you're going to stop that, all by yourself?" she exclaimed. "You're going to protect us from the big bad monster, is that it? Just like in your movies?"

"I'm going to challenge Goro," Johnny said. "Shang Tsung won't be expecting that. I figure he–"

"You can't do that!" Sonya said. "It's not how the tournament works!"

“How would you know how the tournament works?” Johnny shouted. “Yesterday you knew even less about it than I did! Do you want to die? Do you want everyone to die? Take the whole earth with you? I can beat him!”

“You can beat him!” Sonya exploded. “*You* can beat him! You are the most egotistical, the most self-deluded, the *stupidest* person I’ve ever met!”

“What? Because I don’t want to see anyone else bludgeoned to death for Shang Tsung’s entertainment?”

“Don’t you dare do this to protect me, Johnny Cage!”

“You! You think I’m talking about you! And you call me egotistical?” Johnny spun around and walked away. A moment later he turned back. Speaking more quietly now, he said, “Wait a minute. Are you worried about me?”

“Oh! Listen to him! You’re being absurd.”

“You are worried.”

“I am not!”

“You are. You like me,” Johnny said.

“You wish!” Sonya said. It was her turn to walk away. Johnny followed her with his eyes until she was out of sight among the statues and trees of the garden.

He smiled to himself. “The girl’s in love,” he said.

Johnny let the chain hang from his hand again, bowed to his imaginary opponent, and once more launched into his kata.

Chapter Thirteen

When Sonya arrived at the Great Hall the rings were filled with fighters, both human and Outworld. The day's bouts had already commenced. Black-cowled monks wrote the results on their scrolls as each fight ended. From the looks of those who were being helped or carried off the field, the fighters of Earth were taking the worst of it.

She spotted Liu Kang up ahead. He stood watching a duel between a man who was wielding a pair of sais against an Outworlder with long blond hair and a short beard who was standing bare-handed. She walked up beside Liu and paused to watch the match. It didn't last long after she arrived – the Outworlder drew in a breath and shouted. Or, in any case, his mouth moved as if he were shouting, but Sonya couldn't hear a sound. The sai man, however, apparently could hear. He dropped his metal weapons and clapped his hands to his ears. Again the Outworlder shouted. Sonya felt a slight tremor in the air. The Outworlder's opponent fell backwards as if hit by a heavy blow. He crumpled on the spot and lay still.

The watching monk wrote down the results and moved on to another bout. Liu turned to Sonya.

"Good morning," he said. His face appeared strained.

"How are we doing?" Sonya asked. Far away, a drum started beating, the sound carrying above the noise of hand-to-hand combat.

"We're getting the crap beat out of us," Liu replied.

"That good, eh?"

Liu looked past Sonya's shoulder. She saw his posture stiffen. She turned to see Shang Tsung approaching, escorted by a cadre of guards and monks. Shang stopped a dozen feet from Sonya and bowed. Neither Sonya nor Liu returned the gesture of respect. Shang let the matter pass, although his eyes flashed. After a moment he spoke, addressing Sonya directly.

"I have a present for you," Shang said. His dark, burning eyes seemed to bore in on the Special Forces lieutenant.

Sonya looked at him coldly. "I can't imagine you having anything that I could possibly want."

"That's not true," Shang replied, measuring his words and watching her closely. "There is one thing you want very much."

“And what do you think that might be?” Sonya asked. Her voice was quiet but dangerous.

“Observe,” Shang said. He turned, gesturing into the ring behind them. A new fighter had entered the ring.

“Your next opponent,” Shang said. “Tell me, Lieutenant Blade: Are you not pleased?”

Sonya followed his gesture. Inside the ring, his muscular chest bared, stood Kano. The right side of his face glinted silver in the sun, and his eye glowed red. The crime lord flexed his arms and smirked at her.

“How ya doin’, babe?” Kano asked. “Did you miss me?”

“Your next opponent,” Shang said. He smiled. “Does my little gift amuse you?”

She heard Liu Kang whisper urgently, “Stay cool, Sonya, stay cool,” and ignored it. Instead, she turned toward Kano.

“You’re under arrest,” she said.

Kano laughed. “Why don’t you come and get me?” he replied, taunting her, gesturing her closer. “We could get real friendly in here.”

Sonya has already moved a step closer to the ring. She felt Liu Kang’s hand on her arm and shook it off. She kept her gaze fixed on the crime lord.

“We can do this the easy way, Kano, or we can do it the hard way. Your choice.”

“Let’s make it the hard way,” Kano said. “Come on, what are you afraid of?”

“Not a thing,” Sonya said. She stepped over the line of small stones which separated the ring from the rest of the field. The center of the ring was filled with soft sand. “Not a single, solitary thing.”

“That’s the way,” Kano said. “Come to poppa.”

He reached down into his boot and pulled out a knife. He held it up and turned it back and forth before his eyes, making the steel blade flash in the sunlight. “This baby sure brings back memories,” he said.

Sonya kept her eyes on Kano, not the knife. If he wanted to blind her with a flash of sunlight, he wasn't going to succeed. "You used it to stab your mother in the back?"

"Guess again," Kano said. "It put a big smile on your partner. From ear to ear."

Sonya moved, bringing up her right foot and snapping it forward at Kano's kneecap. But Kano's leg wasn't there. He'd moved it aside, and took the opportunity to deliver his own downward punch to Sonya's thigh.

She blocked inward with her forearm, but again Kano had moved, this time putting her into a hip throw which bore her to the sandy floor. She rolled to her feet, knees bent and arms forward, facing him. Kano only laughed, and tossed his knife from his right hand to his left.

"I've studied all your moves, sweetheart," he said. "You can't touch me. But I can touch you any time."

His left hand flashed out, the blade winking, thrusting at her face.

"Then study *this*!"

She hit the back of his knife hand with the edge of her right hand, at the same time hitting the inside of his wrist with her left. His hand flew open and the knife twirled away. She grasped his wrist and his elbow then, forcing them back and down, in a move to dislocate his shoulder.

But Kano was still larger and stronger than Sonya. He held her with sheer mass of muscle, despite the leverage she was using. Then he smashed the heel of his right hand forward, aiming for the bridge of her nose.

Sonya ducked under the thrust, rapidly punching high and low. Then she dove, hands straight down in the sand, and launched herself feet first at Kano.

She trapped his neck between her muscular legs and began to squeeze.

Their bodies locked together, Sonya and Kano collapsed in a heap on the sand. No matter what he tried, the crime lord was unable to break free. His face was turning red, his one good eye bulging. Sonya tightened her grip. Kano couldn't breathe. Soon his struggles grew weaker and more random. Sonya only held him tighter.

"Sonya, stop!" Liu shouted. His voice sounded very far away to Sonya, far away and unimportant. "That's what he wants!"

“That’s right,” Shang said, his voice exultant. “Finish him! Pay me tribute with his death!”

“Sonya!” Liu called out. “Don’t do it! If you kill him, Shang Tsung will own you!”

Sonya heard another sound, the sound of thousands of voices crying in despair, as they had cried in the Great Hall when Art Lean died. Shang Tsung was calling on his powers, preparing to absorb Kano’s soul as he had so many others.

“No!” Sonya shouted. “Nobody owns me! *Nobody!*”

She loosened her grip and let Kano slump to the sand.

Rolling away from her opponent, she rose slowly to her feet and walked out of the ring, leaving the fallen Kano behind her.

Shang Tsung blocked her path. “You disappointed me,” the sorcerer said. “That wasn’t wise.”

“You don’t write my efficiency reports and you don’t sign my paychecks,” Sonya said. “I don’t answer to you.”

“But one day soon,” Shang said, “you will.”

He backed away, arms raised, and shouted again at the ranks of humans assembled on the fighting grounds.

“All of you will!”

The sun over the island was high in the sky. Liu and Sonya sat resting in the shade of a tree. The fighters from the Realm of Earth hadn’t been having a good day. Other than Sonya and Liu, most of them had lost their fights.

“I haven’t seen Johnny today,” Liu said. “Have you?”

“Not since morning,” Sonya said. “Do you suppose he’s lost a bout?”

The thought that he might have done so made her sad. And that surprised her.

Suddenly Liu held up his hand for silence. “Do you hear something?” he asked.

“No, I... wait. Someone’s shouting.”

Far away, echoing from the sides of the mountain, someone was indeed shouting.

“Goro!” the voice called. “Goro!”

“Who do you suppose that is?” Liu asked.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Sonya said. “I think I know. Come on.”

The two stood and walked away from the arena area, past the Great Hall, up to the statuary garden where Art Lean lay buried. They were not the only ones heading in that direction, nor were they the first to arrive. A number of others, both human and Outworlder, were in the garden when they arrived, looking in wonder at the man they saw there.

Johnny Cage stood in the statuary garden. He was banging on a metal pan, creating a racket, and in between his drumming he was shouting.

“Goro! Goro!” he yelled. He pounded on the bottom of the pan and shouted again, “Goro!”

Shang Tsung approached through the crowd. The sorcerer’s face was serene, and he was surrounded by his usual crowd of bodyguards and monks.

“Is there something you want?” Shang asked as he drew near.

“Yeah,” Johnny replied. “A Big Mac and a large order of fries would suit me just fine, but I’ll settle for that tub of lard with the four arms.”

Shang shook his head in disbelief. “You’re challenging Goro? You weren’t supposed to fight him yet.”

“Is there something the matter with right now?” Johnny asked. “Or is the big guy taking his beauty sleep?”

“Are you that eager to die?” Shang asked in his turn. “That’s the sign of a true hero.”

“I’m not the one who’s going to die.”

“I see,” Shang said. “You’re very foolish.”

The sorcerer regarded Johnny with burning eyes, leaning closer to look into his soul.

"I see," Shang said at last. "You think you can protect your friends."

"So what if I do? Either I can handle it or I can't. Want to find out which?"

"Make no mistake," Shang said. He spoke slowly and in simple words, as if instructing a child. "They too will die. After Goro has destroyed you."

"Then what's the problem?" Johnny asked. "Bring him out."

Shang cradled his chin in his hand, thinking. "As absurd as your demand is," he said at last, looking directly at Johnny, "I will grant it. In return, I reserve the right to challenge the winner, or another of my choosing, at the place appointed by me, for the last battle of this final Mortal Kombat."

"You got it, pal," Johnny said.

Shang laughed aloud. And as if in echo, a voice of thunder shouted, "*No!*"

Lord Rayden forced his way through the crowd in the garden to stand before Shang and Johnny. His eyes were burning with electric fire, and his voice rolled out loud and strong.

"There is no provision for this!" he said in ringing tones. "A champion fighting anyone other than the day's champion, and the final bout set by any means other than winning a previous match? I cannot allow it."

"But it isn't yours to allow or disallow," Shang said. He smiled at Rayden's anger. "I command here, Lord Rayden, and the rules are quite explicit. How do they say it in your miserable Realm of Earth? 'A deal's a deal'?"

The sorcerer made a mocking half-bow to Rayden, then turned and walked away with his retinue. When he had gone, Rayden turned to Johnny Cage.

"What have you done?" Rayden demanded, his voice booming and his blue eyes flashing.

Johnny turned to face the angry god.

“I exercised my own free will,” he said. His voice snapped with defiance. “I made a choice. This is our tournament, remember? The humans from Earth? The power of life? It’s Mortal Kombat! We fight it, not you. It’s our fate, not yours!”

“Good,” Rayden said. A quick smile broke through his grim expression. He turned to Sonya and Liu, eyeing them both before he went on.

“At last one of you has understood.”

Chapter Fourteen

It was afternoon on the island. The sun was halfway between the zenith and the horizon. A pleasant breeze rippled the silken banners and stirred and rustled among the leaves.

The fighters from the Realm of Earth were gathered near the statuary garden. Liu Kang stood among them.

He heard a voice behind him. A woman, whispering, secret.

“Liu Kang, your time will come.”

“How?” Liu asked, not turning his head. His attention was fixed on the area the guards were clearing. “Whoever wins this bout, it’s over.”

“No. It’s not over yet.”

Liu recognized the voice. He’d heard it once before, whispering in his ear as he lay pinned in a fighting arena.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “What do you want?”

“Only that you trust me.”

Liu turned. Princess Kitana, surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting, walked slowly away.

Johnny Cage strolled into the statuary garden and leaned casually against one of the pedestals. He was wearing a loose black uniform. He took out a pair of dark glasses from his pocket and slipped them on.

“What’s the story here?” he asked. “Am I going to have to wait all day?”

As if in answer, trumpets sounded from near the mouth of the tunnel to Shokan. Drums beat fiercely. A huge figure emerged. Goro. The Shokan prince halted in the sunlight, raised his four arms, and bellowed a roaring challenge to the sky, the same cry he had made the night before in the Great Hall, just before he killed Art Lean.

The half-dragon strode forward into the garden, where Johnny was waiting, still apparently unconcerned, with a monk holding a scroll standing beside him. Goro halted a dozen feet from Johnny and once again bellowed his challenge.

Johnny looked at him, unimpressed. “You’re gonna hurt yourself doing that.”

Goro stopped and tilted his huge head to one side, regarding Johnny. He reached up and unfastened the golden buckle which held his cape shut. Dropping the silken fabric, he stepped forward dressed in his loincloth alone. His long hair, bound in a ponytail, swung behind him.

“Strange,” he said softly. “We’ve barely met, and already I don’t like you.”

“Impossible,” said Johnny. “Everybody likes me.”

He looked up at the Outworld champion. The sun’s rays were striking in Goro’s eyes. Johnny took off his dark glasses and held them out.

“Here,” he said. “Want to borrow these?”

Goro took the glasses in his hand and slowly crushed them. He dropped the fragments and ground them into the dirt with his foot. “I’m going to enjoy dismembering you,” he said.

The monk made a mark on his scroll, then turned and walked away, leaving the two fighters alone in the statuary garden. Johnny let the length of chain he’d been practicing with that morning unroll from his right hand. He spun it in a slow circle. The sunlight caught on the links and made them sparkle.

“Let’s dance,” he said.

Goro paced steadily forward. He reached out to grab Johnny, to take him and crush him, but Johnny’s chain whistled in and smashed Goro across the knuckles. Johnny stepped away, even as Goro pulled his hand back with a grunt of pain.

Johnny smiled, and gestured with his left hand to Goro.

“Come and get it,” he said. He sounded amused. “There’s plenty more where that came from.”

Goro rushed at Johnny, all four arms moving at blinding speed to strike his human opponent. Johnny stood for a moment more with the same mocking smile, then did a series of back flips to escape the oncoming giant. The actor vanished behind the statue of Kung Lao.

The other fighters from the Realm of Earth watched from the sidelines. Sonya and Liu stood by side.

“What’s he doing?” Liu asked. His expression was puzzled.

“He said he was working on a strategy,” Sonya said. “I guess this is it.”

Out in the statuary garden, Johnny stuck his head out from behind a statue. He waved to Goro.

“Yoo hoo!” Johnny called. “Over here, big boy!”

Goro turned toward him. Johnny blew a kiss and ducked back behind the statue. Goro howled with rage and rushed to Johnny’s hiding place. But when the Outworlder emerged from the other side of the statue, after having stalked all the way around the pedestal, he was clearly puzzled. Johnny had vanished again.

“This is a strategy?” Liu said.

“I suppose so,” Sonya said. “I don’t know what else you’d call it.”

Liu shrugged. “Maybe he’s trying to tire Goro out.”

Goro was hunting back and forth among the statues. Suddenly a twig snapped. Goro spun toward the sound, hands high, Even as he did so, the chain flashed out and twirled around his upper left wrist. Johnny dived in from behind the statue, twisting the chain in a nutcracker grip. He twisted again. With a sound like a rifle shot the giant’s wrist broke. Johnny rolled between Goro’s legs and sprinted for the pedestal of another statue.

Goro held his injured wrist in his opposite hand. “So the little puppy has a bite,” he gritted between clenched teeth.

He turned to follow Johnny, but the singing chain forced the giant to respect the distance between them. Johnny sidestepped behind another statue and was gone.

The crowd of fighters cheered.

Now Goro was angry. He stalked relentlessly from statue to statue, following Johnny. The entire tone of the match had changed. Where before it had seemed almost playful, with Johnny’s taunts, now there was an air of deadly seriousness to it. The Shokan prince’s face was pale, his dark eyes flashed as he moved more and more quickly after the dodging, elusive human fighter. The edge of the cliff grew nearer.

Goro was forcing Johnny back. With the sea at his back and the giant warrior before him, the human soon would have no more places to hide.

"Johnny!" Sonya shouted. "Johnny! Fight him! Win!"

The chain snaked out from behind a statue, stinging Goro's upper right arm. Goro turned and stalked toward Johnny with murder in his eyes.

Johnny stood his ground as Goro lunged at him. Then suddenly he leapt and rolled, and the glittering chain wrapped around Goro's right ankle. Johnny rolled to his feet, and pulled hard on the chain. Goro fell.

The giant caught himself on his hands, rotating his body in an attempt to bring himself back to his feet. Johnny twisted the chain and broke the Shokan's ankle.

Goro bellowed, his voice shaking the air, and reached down with one of his lower arms. He grabbed the length of chain, yanked it out of Johnny's grasp, and threw it away. Twisting and sparkling, it tumbled over the edge of the cliff and was gone.

Goro got to his feet, and took a slow, painful step toward Johnny. "Now, little man, you're mine."

He took another shuffling step.

Liu turned his face aside, looking away from the combat, and away from where Sonya stood, her fists clenched in tension. He saw Rayden standing beside him. As always, the god's face was like a mask, revealing nothing.

"Lord Rayden," Liu asked, "what will happen?"

"Not even the gods know that," Rayden replied, and Liu turned back to the duel.

Johnny had dodged behind the last statue before the edge of the cliff. Goro approached, dragging his right foot painfully. Then, rather than go right or left around the statue, Goro began to climb the pedestal, using his three good hands to pull himself up and over the top of the statue.

"Idiot," Sonya muttered. Liu supposed she was talking about Johnny. "Why doesn't he get away?"

Liu shook his head helplessly and yelled, "Johnny! Look up!"

But it was too late. Goro sprang down from above. Johnny, hiding behind the statue, barely evaded the huge, hurtling body. Even then, he wasn't fast enough to evade the backhanded blow that Goro delivered to his chest. Johnny flew across the open garden and smashed into the pedestal of another statue.

Johnny got to his feet, holding his side. The blow had driven the breath from his body, and perhaps broken some of his ribs. He remained bent over while Goro approached him with death in his eyes.

"Get away from him!" Liu called. "Remember what happened to Art!"

Johnny turned, but he was boxed in by the pedestals of three statues. Goro came inexorably on.

A moment later, Goro snapped another punch to Johnny's body. Johnny reeled backward, fetching up against a pedestal. Goro punched him again. Johnny crumbled forward to lie motionless face down on the ground.

Shang stepped forward from his place at the edge of the arena. The chorus of the damned, the howling cacophony, rose around him as his captive souls cried out in torment.

"Johnny! Get up!" Liu yelled, and Sonya cried out, "Johnny! Johnny, please!"

Shang Tsung came slowly forward. Goro saw him, and bowed his head. Then the Shokan knelt, and scooped Johnny up in his lower arms. He stood, and turned to face the demon sorcerer. The howling dissonance increased, swirling fiercely around the fighting field.

Goro stood, battle-weary, before his demon master, not kneeling now, a hint of defiance in his large black eyes. Shang saw it, and stretched forth his hand, while the chorus of enslaved souls grew louder.

"Where is my tribute?" Shang asked.

Goro went down on one knee, holding Johnny's inert form, lifting it up in offering to Shang. The emperor's demon smiled, and extended his hand toward Johnny.

As Johnny reached Goro's eye level, the human fighter came suddenly to life, twisting and exploding outward in a powerful karate punch.

"Aiyaah!" Johnny yelled – and struck directly between Goro's eyes.

Staggered by the force of the blow and by surprised, Goro loosened his powerful grip for an instant, and Johnny tumbled free. As he rolled to the ground he grabbed the long ponytail of the kneeling Shokan. He looped the rope of hair around Goro's thick neck and pulled back, using all the leverage of his body to increase the strangling force.

Goro surged to his feet, but Johnny's weight on the loop of his hair only made the situation worse. The Outworld champion's face reddened and his tongue stuck out. He clawed at his neck, trying to reestablish an airway.

"What's the matter?" Johnny snarled from behind him. "Having a bad hair day?"

Johnny increased the pressure on the strangle hold. Goro tried to smash Johnny against a statue pedestal. The actor swung out of the way and still kept up the force on Goro's windpipe.

In a desperate effort, Goro flung himself on his back, trying to crush Johnny with his weight. At the last moment, Johnny sprang free. Goro smashed backward, sprawling full-length on the ground.

The Shokan prince lay wheezing for a moment, trying to regain his breath, but now Johnny had comeback, and was attacking without mercy. Punch and kick combinations rained down on the giant warrior as he struggled to his knees.

Goro flailed away at Johnny with his good arms, but without success. He tried to regain his footing, but his broken ankle hindered him. Johnny kept snapping kicks at his massive head. Goro's body rocked from side to side with the force of the blows.

At last Goro regained his feet, howling defiance. "Now I will show you no mercy!" he snapped, and dropped into a fighting crouch.

"Whatever you say," Johnny replied.

The actor stood, readying himself. Then, in an amazing display of skill, he launched his shadow kick at Goro. To those who were watching, Johnny's body seemed to fade, darken, and elongate as his foot sped forward. Goro's blocking arms stopped only air. The kick caught Goro in the center of his chest, and knocked him backward. Johnny himself fell on his back on the ground, stunned by the force of his own blow.

Under the impact of the shadow kick, Goro's uninjured foot slipped from under him. The broken ankle alone was not strong enough to hold the giant's weight. He swayed, lost his balance, and

teetered on the edge of the cliff. For a moment he appeared to hang there, all motion suspended. Then he was gone.

Johnny rolled over and pushed himself up with his hands. He got his feet under him, then walked to the cliff's edge. The wind blowing up the side of the cliff felt cool against the sweat of combat on his face as he looked out and down.

Incredibly, Goro still hung there, holding onto the edge of the cliff with his one good upper hand. Far below, the sheer face of the cliff vanished into the clouds which writhed around the island's spike of stone.

Goro's face was white and straining. The giant was unable to pull up his massive weight with just one arm. He tried to get a purchase on the cliff with one of his lower arms, but there was nothing on the smooth stone for him to grip.

The crowd had fallen silent. Sonya grabbed Liu's hand and gripped it hard, so that her fingernails dug into his flesh.

Johnny was aware of another presence at his shoulder. Shang Tsung had walked up to stand beside him. The demon sorcerer looked from Johnny to Goro and back again. Then the sorcerer addressed Johnny directly.

"Finish him!" Shang said.

"No..." Goro said, but his voice was quiet and dignified, not pleading. Once again he was the proud Shokan prince, the general of the armies of Outworld. And he was speaking not to Shang Tsung, but to Johnny Cage.

"Finish him," Shang repeated, his voice sharp and commanding. "Give me my tribute!"

"So you can steal his soul?" Johnny asked. "I've won. That's enough."

"It is not enough!" Shang exclaimed, his eyes burning. The chorus of trapped spirits howled around him. "His soul now – or yours later!"

Johnny turned away from Shang Tsung. He lay down on the ground at the cliff's edge, his face only inches away from Goro's. He stuck his right hand down the cliff, reaching for one of Goro's lower hands.

"Go on," Johnny said. "Grab hold. I'll help you up."

“So I can crawl back to my cave and die in disgrace?” Goro asked. “I think not. I am a Shokan warrior! We die in battle!”

The clouds below roiled in a tumult of wind.

Johnny nodded. “You fought well,” he said. “I understand.”

Without another word, Goro pushed himself away from the cliff, letting go with his upper hand. The Outworld giant fell down and away, his body spinning against the clouds beneath. Johnny watched him go until he vanished, still falling, face still stoically composed, down into the billowing mist. The chorus of enslaved souls faded and disappeared.

Johnny stood at last, his face wet with sweat, tears forming in his eyes. He turned away from the cliff’s edge. He ignored the furious Shang Tsung and walked, slowly and painfully, toward the surging crowd of earthly fighters.

Rayden was in the crowd, dressed, as always, in the garb of a humble coolie. Johnny walked up to the God of Lightning and bowed his head.

“Well done,” Rayden said.

Just at that moment Johnny heard a loud scream, not of pain or fear but of anger.

“No! Let me go!”

It was Sonya Blade.

Johnny and Rayden turned, and saw that Shang Tsung had the earthly woman in an immobilizing grip, with one hand on her throat and the other twisting her arm up behind her back.

“I hereby exercise my right of challenge!” Shang cried, his voice loud and carrying. “I challenge... *this one*!”

The dissonant chorus of enslaved souls once again began to howl.

Chapter Fifteen

"You are a coward, sorcerer!" Rayden cried in a voice of thunder. "Stand and fight!"

The wind through the statuary garden blew higher. Dust and small leaves whirled through the air. The wind howled around the statues with a keening sound like the souls trapped by Shang Tsung's Black Arts.

"The rules of the tournament are quite clear, Lord Rayden," said Shang. He and Sonya were in the center of the whirlwind. "Mortal Kombat continues. I reserved the right to challenge the winner, or another of my choosing, at the place appointed by me, for the last battle of this final Mortal Kombat. I'm simply changing the place, and the fighter, as your champion agreed."

The whirlwind grew higher. Black clouds gathered over the island, plunging it into a dusky twilight. The whirlwind grew opaque, hiding Shang and his captive from view.

"Sonya!" Johnny shouted.

A high wind blew across the garden, driving stinging rain before it. The sky darkened. The whirlwind spun higher, then collapsed. Where Sonya and Shang Tsung had been standing, nothing remained.

Johnny turned to Rayden. "Where has he taken her?"

"To the emperor's castle in the wastelands of Outworld," Rayden said. "Where I cannot follow."

"But I can," Liu said. His jaw was clenched and his voice tight. "I'm going after them."

"Not without me you're not," Johnny said. He turned back to Rayden. "Lord Rayden, can Sonya beat Shang Tsung?"

"No," the God of Thunder replied. "I'm sorry."

"*You're* sorry–" Johnny began.

Rayden raised his hand to cut him off. Lightning cracked in the sky above them as the storm broke. "But there is one last rule. A rule which Shang Tsung neglected to mention."

"She has to accept the challenge, or there can be no final combat," Liu said. "Or so the legends say."

“But you know her!” Johnny exclaimed. The rain plastered his hair to his skull and ran down his face. His clothes were soaked. “She’ll never back down!”

Rayden shook his head sadly. “Then the Kombat is lost.”

“I’ve got to stop her! I can fight Shang Tsung!” Johnny said. “I beat Goro; I’m the champion now!”

“Johnny Cage, you have played your part splendidly. But this battle you cannot win,” Rayden said.

“Then who can?” Johnny asked.

He and Rayden stood for a moment looking at one another. Then, as one, they turned to look at Liu.

Liu shrugged.

“Okay, so you’re the one,” Johnny said to his companion. “Now: how do we get to Outworld?”

“Truly a frivolous question,” Rayden said.

Liu nodded in slow understanding. The other two stood and watched him as he looked about at the storm-wracked island. “We’re already there,” he said.

“I have nothing further to teach you, Liu Kang,” Rayden said. “You possess the knowledge to defeat Shang Tsung. All that is lacking now is the will.” He placed a fatherly hand on Liu’s shoulder. “You are indeed the Chosen One.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” Johnny asked Rayden.

Rayden shook his head. “In Outworld, if you look hard enough, you will have another guide. Good luck.”

A terrific roll of thunder beat across the island. The storm winds rose, screaming around them. The clouds thickened and a thick mist enveloped Johnny and Liu.

A moment later, the mist dissipated. Johnny and Liu were standing in the remnants of a devastated ancient city. Broken walls of brick and stone, smeared with soot, stood on every hand. Bright shards of glass sparkled underfoot, mixed with the dirt and mud. They stood beside a

roadway of black ash which led through the ruins to a distant, towering mountain fortress. The roadway was lined with twisted metal gargoyles.

"So, where are we, O Chosen One?" Johnny asked.

"Where we've always been," Liu replied slowly, looking about him. "We're in Outworld. The island was an illusion created by Shang Tsung to make us believe we were still on Earth. We crossed into Outworld that night on the ship."

Johnny put his hands on his hips. He turned slowly around, surveying the landscape.

"So this is Outworld?" He looked at the crumbling walls. Something small and brown scurried away. "I can see why they would want a change of scenery."

He turned to examine one of the gargoyles. It was made of metal, about twice as tall as a man. On closer examination, Johnny saw that each gargoyle was a cage, and each cage held the remains of a humanoid creature. Some were fairly fresh. Others had rotted away to mere skeletons.

Johnny turned aside in disgust.

"We should head for that tower," Liu said, pointing to the forbidding fortress built on the high crag. Scurrying dark shapes moved along the tops of the tower walls, and slit-like windows gleamed with firelight in the crenellated towers. "Shang Tsung will have taken Sonya there."

"Scary-looking place," Johnny said. Battlements rose above the black walls while drifting smoke swirled about them. The red of the setting sun under low clouds tinged the fang-like towers. Dark birds wheeled around the brooding fortress.

"The Black Tower," Liu said. "According to the legends, the emperor built it on the burial mound of his enemies."

Johnny let out a low whistle. "That guy sure had a whole lot of enemies."

"Now he has two more," Liu replied. "Time to go."

They began to walk along the desolate avenue, heading up toward the emperor's fortress.

Deep within the Black Tower, far below ground level, was a great circular arena. Its floor was made up of thousands of stones arranged in a mosaic to form the dragon-headed symbol of Mortal Kombat. Dozens of blazing torches circled the area, filling it with shadows and highlights as the flames twisted and flared. A pillar of onyx stood in the center of the room, high and smooth, its polished sides reflecting the torchlight in their depths.

Sonya stood against the pillar. She was dressed in the silk garments, and her legs and arms were bare. Her hands were chained together and lifted high over her head, attached to a hook above her on the pillar.

The Special Forces lieutenant faced a silent monk. The monk raised a goblet of water to her lips. She turned her head aside.

All at once a deep gong sounded, its harsh tones echoing across the circle. Through a hidden door, Shang Tsung approached. He wore cloth-of-gold robes stitched with green and black embroideries depicting dragons entwined in combat, and carried a fan.

As Shang approached, the monk bowed and backed away.

“It’s been great talking to you,” Sonya said, addressing the monk. “I’m sure you’re going to get that raise and the big promotion. And I hope things work out with your girlfriend.”

“I’m afraid your sarcasm is wasted on him,” Shang said when the monk had vanished from sight. “He is as incapable of hearing as he is of speech.”

Sonya looked at Shang with total scorn in her eyes. “Why have you brought me here?” she asked. “Why not Liu or Johnny? Are you afraid of them?”

“I fear no human,” Shang said. “I brought you here so that you might be my queen. I have never seen a human female warrior such as you. I must possess you.”

Sonya laughed in his face.

“You fail to appreciate your position,” Shang said. “You are my prisoner now.” He stroked his chin with his fingers, eyeing her speculatively. “You can be my slave queen, if that’s how you want it,” he added.

“In your dreams,” Sonya said, but deep inside she felt a shiver of fear.

“Nearly all of my dreams have already come true,” Shang said. He looked closely at her, his eyes large and dark before her, but with a flame burning at their bottoms. She felt as if he were gazing down into her soul, violating her at the deepest level. She returned his gaze, however, head high and defiant.

“This dream of yours will become a nightmare,” Sonya promised him, holding him with her own gaze.

“I can lay the Realm of Earth at your feet and fulfill your every fantasy, Sonya,” Shang Tsung said, his voice equal parts pleading and boasting. The torches flared around him. Far away in the castle a rattle of drums sounded.

“What do *you* know about my fantasies?”

“I can see into your woman’s soul,” Shang replied. “You’re tired of being alone, always on your guard. Just once you’d like to let your defenses down and give yourself totally and unconditionally to a man who is your equal. I am that man. At dawn you will fight me in the final battle of Mortal Kombat. You will lose, for you must. You are not my match as a fighter.”

Shang paused to look at her again. Then he continued speaking as he returned to pacing the stone floor.

“I will spare you, Sonya, in your defeat. And afterward we will live happily ever after.”

“That’s really sick and perverted,” she said. “What happens if I refuse to fight you?”

“You? Back down from a challenge? When have you ever done that? It’s simply not in your nature.”

“You don’t know the first thing about my nature. Human beings can change – but you wouldn’t understand that.”

Shang gave her a sharp glance. “There’s something else,” he said. “Something you hope to hide from me. Tell me.”

He stared at her as she tried to twist her head aside. “Ah,” he said at last. “I see it. You hope that Johnny Cage will come here after you.”

“Yes,” Sonya said. “I’m not the rightful champion of the Realm of Earth. And he is.”

“I hope he does come after you,” Shang said. “You can watch me destroy him.”

“Johnny Cage beat Goro.”

“But he can’t beat me,” Shang said. His voice was smooth and reasonable. “If you want to spare him, you will fight me yourself. Then I will enter the Realm of Earth in triumph, together with my benevolent master the emperor. And you, Sonya, will be at my side.”

The sun set in a blaze of red over the ruined city of Outworld. A foul breeze stirred the ash on the road.

Johnny and Liu continued to trudge along toward the Black Tower. All at once, Liu held up his hand, halting them.

“What is it?” Johnny whispered. The wind sighed among the broken walls. Dark humanoid figures darted among the shadows.

“Wait,” Liu said. He stood silent, motionless, eyes closed. A moment passed, then another. “There’s something else.”

He paused a moment more. Then his hand darted out.

“Gotcha!” Liu said. He grasped the neck of a struggling creature nearly his own size. A moment before, the creature had been perfectly camouflaged against the nearby wall.

“This is the thing that spit acid in my face, down in the tunnels,” Liu said. He jerked the creature’s head aside just as a cloud of stinging vapor shot forth from its mouth.

But the creature wasn’t finished. It twisted and spun, trying to pull away from Liu. The two of them thrashed in the dust. Johnny couldn’t get near to give his friend a hand as they rolled over and over. The creature Liu had caught changed shape again and again, and shifted in color from the black of the stones to the green of jungle leaves, until finally it turned the dead white of moonlight. Its eyes were large and staring red.

The creature’s tail whipped out, taking Liu’s legs and pulling them from beneath him. Liu fell down heavily and lost his grip. In the same instant Johnny leapt into the white thing, grabbing the shape-shifter from behind, pulling it up and holding it away from his companion.

Liu scrambled to his feet. He braced, then shot out a powerful side kick. It took the creature in the belly, knocking it away from Johnny. The white creature spun away, bumping one of the

metal gargoyles which lined the road. In the blink of an eye, metal tendrils shot out of the gargoyle, entwining and encasing the creature.

The creature howled once, a hideous sound full of agony. Then it was silent. The gargoyle enveloped the creature inside itself until the two seemed to be one. Liu and Johnny turned away, overcome with the sudden horror they had witnessed.

A woman's voice spoke behind them.

"You're finally learning, Liu Kang," she said.

"Kitana!" Liu exclaimed.

"Come with me," Kitana said. "We must hurry." She turned away, her silken gown rippling. "We don't have any time to lose."

The three walked quickly along the road, heading toward the fortress.

"What happened here?" Liu asked, gesturing around him to take in the whole dreary scene.

"The same thing that will happen to your world, unless you prevent it," Kitana replied. Her voice was bitter. "My father was the rightful ruler of Outworld. Then his best warriors lost ten Mortal Kombats, and the emperor killed my parents and made me his ward to lay claim to the throne."

She looked sadly at the blasted landscape. "This place was beautiful once, before Shang Tsung engineered its destruction."

"How can I stop this from happening in my world?" Liu asked.

"The power to save your world lies within you," Kitana said. "If I did not believe in you, Liu Kang, I would not have helped you. In the Black Tower you will face three challenges. Prepare yourself. You must face your enemy, you must face yourself, and you must face your worst fear."

They walked along rapidly for some time, until they reached the foot of the Black Tower. The gates were closed and barred. The walls of the castle rose high and sheer before them, the sides smooth as glass.

"What do you think?" Johnny asked, hands on his hips.

“I think we’re in trouble,” Liu replied.

A group of monks encircled them, eyes gleaming under their hoods. Unlike the peaceful monks on the islands, these carried gleaming metal knives in their hands.

“Back to back,” Johnny said. “And let’s see who’s the best.”

Chapter Sixteen

Outside the castle, dawn was near. Within, down in the lower dungeon area, the shadows were deep where the light of the torches didn't reach. A drum, deep and steady, sounded out a slow cadence. Sonya's arms ached from being tied to the stone pillar. It felt like forever since she'd been free.

The doors in front of her opened, and Shang Tsung paced in. He was resplendent in a robe of still silk, and his head was covered by a tight black cap. He appeared well pleased with himself, and already he looked at Sonya with the pride of possession in his eyes.

"Have you made your decision, young Sonya?" he asked. A pair of monks standing beside him, scrolls ready in their hands. "You must fight me now, or yield Earth to the emperor."

"I won't fight you, Shang Tsung!" she said. "I'm not playing into your game, whatever it is."

"There is no one else," Shang replied, his voice low and reasonable. "If you don't fight, the Realm of Earth will forfeit the tournament, and its portals will open to our great emperor."

"I do not yield Earth – it's not mine to give," Sonya said. "But nevertheless, I will not fight."

A gong rang. Double doors opened in the walls of the arena room. Two long lines of black-hooded monks paced in, silent as always. They lined the circular walls, facing inward toward the captive woman and her tormentor.

"So be it," Shang said. "Prepare then for my triumphant entry into the emperor's newest realm."

"My friends–" Sonya said.

"Are dead," Shang replied. "Shall I tell you how Johnny died, screaming in pain, and how Liu perished a prisoner in the emperor's dungeons? Save yourself a great deal of trouble. Give me willingly what you must grant me regardless."

"You're bluffing. You could never capture Liu and Johnny! My friends are coming!"

Shang ran his finger along the edge of Sonya's jaw. She jerked her head away.

"Hoping against hope is such an endearing, human trait," Shang said, turning and pacing away from her. "I'm touched. Really. This is your last chance. Fight me in Mortal Kombat."

“Go to hell!”

“Take her away,” Shang commanded the monks. “And prepare her for her wedding. The emperor will be overjoyed. Victory at no cost. Flawless victory.”

“My friends will come,” Sonya said, as three monks approached her. Two of them unhooked Sonya’s arms from the pillar.

“My friends will come!” Sonya seemed to be trying to convince herself. “My friends *will* come!”

The third monk stepped forward toward the sorcerer and threw back his hood.

“Your friends are here already,” said Johnny Cage.

“Right on cue,” Shang Tsung said, unperturbed. “So much like an actor. Are you challenging me now?”

The second monk threw back his hood in turn.

“No, demon,” Liu Kang said. “*I* challenge you.”

Shang started in amazement, but mastered himself again in a moment. The sorcerer held up his hands, sweeping them toward the two fighters who had appeared, dressed as monks, in the center of the room.

“Seize them!” Shang cried.

The first monk who stood beside Sonya threw back her hood. It was Princess Kitana.

“Stay where you are!” the princess commanded the remaining monks. She turned to face Shang Tsung. “Would you dare interfere with the tournament? Betray your emperor?”

She took a step toward the demon, shielding Sonya behind her. The other black-hooded monks who lined the edges of the room began to close in.

“Even you must know that Mortal Kombat cannot be won by treachery!” Kitana said to Shang Tsung. “Should you refuse a proper challenge, you will pay a heavy penalty. And the emperor will not thank you if you lose for all time the keys to the Realm of Earth! You know, and the emperor knows, that I speak the truth.”

Liu Kang stepped forward and threw off the monk's robe which he wore. He pointed his finger at Shang Tsung.

"I am Liu Kang, descendant of Kung Lao!" he cried. "I challenge you to Mortal Kombat! Do you accept or will you yield?"

For a long moment Shang stood looking at Liu's outstretched arm.

"Remember the penalty for refusing a challenge, sorcerer," Liu said, and the monks in the chamber stirred uneasily. Shang Tsung closed his eyes.

"I accept," he said at last.

Without waiting for another word, the demon sorcerer raised his hands. The doors of the arena chamber flew open. A wind howled through the room, making the torches bob and flare. Liu's hair whipped about his face. A sound began, faint at first, then rising, louder and louder, ever more painful to the ears.

The monks stepped back from the center of the dragon-head circle. Sonya, Johnny, and Kitana stepped back with them. Liu and Shang stood alone in the center of the room, facing each other. The screaming discord of a thousand voices, all in torment, made the stones of the floor vibrate. The noise whirled around them in a deafening crescendo.

"The source of all Shang Tsung's power," Kitana said. "The sound you hear is the souls of a thousand dead warriors crying out in anguish."

Liu took a defensive stance and began to advance toward Shang.

Liu attacked first, a right punch followed by a right front kick. Shang blocked, his reflexes rapid, his technique excellent. Liu punched again, then spun a reaping kick toward the demon's head. Shang blocked, but the force of the blow was so great that it smashed through the defense, rocking the sorcerer back, forcing him to take a step to maintain his balance. Shang kicked, a beautiful flying leap, but Liu was faster, a cross-arm block redirecting the force of the blow and breaking Shang's rhythm.

"The blood of Kung Lao flows in me, and the battle-fury of my ancestors is hot in my veins," Liu said, advancing a step. "See me and see your doom, accursed demon!"

He took another step and poised to make the final assault.

But as Liu came within range, Shang jumped up, levitating, flying across the arena to land on the far side, facing Liu.

Liu turned toward the sorcerer and again began to advance.

“You can’t run,” Liu said, his voice calm. “Only one of us can leave this room, and only when the fight is done. Your magic is useless against me.”

“You fool,” Shang said scornfully. “I have within me an army of slave souls to fight you. I don’t need to run.”

The demon swept down with his arm. Instantly six warriors rose from the stones of the mandala’s floor. They were gaunt-checked and hollow-eyed, but they moved with limber grace. They encircled Liu and began to move in toward him. The drum beat, and the supernatural howling of the enslaved souls grew louder.

“Face your enemy!” Kitana shouted.

Liu reacted quickly. He kicked out toward the warrior closest to his right hand. That man retreated. But Liu’s move was only a feint, a false attack designed to distract attention from the real assault. Liu leapt forward, tumbling in midair to land behind the warrior directly ahead of him. He grabbed that one’s left arm and pulled it up and out. Then he smashed down with the edge of his hand on the man’s shoulder.

A second warrior launched a flying kick at Liu’s back. Sensing rather than seeing the attack, Liu ducked and rolled. The kick connected with the warrior Liu had first struck.

After that, the fight grew faster and more difficult to follow. Even Johnny, who had an appreciation for the finest martial arts fighting, was hard-pressed to keep up with the action. No matter how rapidly the phantom warriors attacked, Liu blocked and turned their attacks against them.

The sounds of terrific blows and feet slapping the stone pavement were the only noises in the room, but even those were all but drowned out by the screaming of Shang’s army of enslaved souls.

Liu punched again and again, driving the ghostly fighters before him. His hands and feet were a blur of motion. Sweat poured from his body so that his black hair hung wetly from his head, but he did not tire. With each blow he delivered he seemed to grow stronger. His form and technique were flawless.

Even as he fought the ghostly warriors, Liu kept his main goal in mind. He was intent on reaching Shang Tsung. The phantoms blocked him, ringing him in, but Liu slipped by them all. Every step brought him nearer to the demon sorcerer.

Then one of the conjured warriors fell to the ground and lay still. His body began to dissolve into mist. A second fell, then a third. Liu was conquering the undead spirits Shang had sent against him.

At last Liu had defeated them all. The howling of the enslaved souls grew mute, as if they too waited to see the outcome of the match between the sorcerer and the descendant of Kung Lao. Liu stepped forward and addressed Shang Tsung.

"Send your slave warriors, sorcerer!" Liu shouted. "Send more! Send them all! Your conjurer's tricks have no power over me."

"Liu Kang," Shang said, his voice heavy with portent, "I can see into your soul. You will die!"

"Face yourself," Kitana whispered, seemingly to herself.

To Johnny's surprise, Liu put his hands on his hips and began to laugh.

"Why, so I will!" Liu shouted. "And so will you, and so will every man. What of it? Perhaps you can look into my soul, but that doesn't mean that you own it!"

Shang took a step backward and turned away from Liu.

"Look at me!" Liu shouted. "I'm not running from myself any longer. I'm not afraid of my destiny."

He walked toward the sorcerer. The spectral voices chanted low, murmuring in protest.

"Face your worst fear," Kitana said.

Liu came up to where Shang stood, facing away across the circle. He put out his hand and placed it on Shang's shoulder, spinning him around.

"Face me, sorcerer!" Liu shouted. But even has he shouted, he started back amazed.

It wasn't Shang Tsung, but Chan, Liu's brother, who stood there, smiled lovingly back at Liu.

“No,” Liu gasped, stepping back. “It’s not really you.”

“Rayden sent me,” Chan said. “To help you.” He took a step toward Liu, holding out his hand.

“You’re not Chan,” Liu whispered.

The floor around the mandala, between the wall where Sonya, Johnny, and Kitana stood began to sink. As it lowered, long spikes were revealed, lancing upward. Liu and Chan stood together on a small stone island, surrounded by a sea of spikes. Liu was separated from his friends.

“Remember when our parents died?” Chan said, smiling, still holding out his hand. “You promised to always take care of me.”

Liu backed away from his brother, tears starting in his eyes. “I remember,” he whispered.

“Now it is my turn to take care of you, brother...”

Liu had backed up more than halfway across the stone circle. He was drawing nearer to the spikes. Chan approached while Liu continued to back away.

“Liu... come with me,” Chan whispered with a smile. They were only feet away from the spikes now. “I forgive you for letting me die.”

“No,” Liu whispered. Then he almost shouted the word. “No! It wasn’t me who killed you!”

“Brother?” Chan asked, puzzled.

“Chan chose his own path. Every man is responsible for his own destiny! And Shang Tsung killed my brother!”

Abruptly Chan’s appearance changed. No longer did Chan seem to stand before Liu. Now it was Shang Tsung. He seemed to glow with an inward fire.

“You’re mine!” Shang said. He reached out his hand. Long, talon-like fingers grew from the tips of his fingers. He was reaching for Liu’s heart. He was reaching for Liu’s soul.

They were too close together, and Liu was out of position. The human fighter could never block in time.

Chapter Seventeen

The sorcerer's hand came up fast, reaching for Liu's heart. But faster still, Liu Kang's hand shot forward, grasping Shang's wrist. The demon's talons nicked Liu's skin, but they could go no farther. Liu held him in a grip of iron.

The chorus of the damned howled, swirling around the room. The anguished cries of the captive souls, enslaved by Shang's arts, were deafening in Liu's ears.

But even has he listened, the sound changed. Words came amid the shrieks. "Free us!" came the words. "Free us! Set us free!"

The sound whirled about them, growing softer, no longer answering to Shang's unspoken commands.

Shang reached down, grasping his own hand, and twisted it up and away from Liu's grip. The demon stepped back, taking a balanced position. Liu also took a fighting stance, but his rear foot was along the edge of the circle. Inches behind him the pit gaped open, spikes, hard and sharp, lifting from its floor.

The two fighters looked deep into one another's eyes. Flames burned within Shang's, while Liu's were hard and glittering with determination.

The voices swirled, crying, "Free us!"

"You hear them, sorcerer," Liu said. "You hear your slaves. You're losing your power over them!"

"They are mine to command still," Shang said. "You know nothing of my arts. My captive spirits will destroy you, and then you will join them in eternal torment within my power."

"They have risen up against you, Shang!" Liu said. "You can't command them now! Free them!"

"No!" Shang said. "They are mine forever!"

He made the sweeping gesture that had called up phantom warriors to his aid earlier. This time nothing happened.

"Free us! Free us!" the voices cried.

Shang stepped back, curling into himself, clamping his hands over his ears.

“Mine!” he whispered.

“All those souls and you still don’t have one of your own,” Liu said. “I pity you, sorcerer.”

Shang looked sharply up.

“Pity is for the weak!” he snapped.

“Your slaves have failed you, demon. Your dark magic is worthless. You’ve lost, Shang Tsung. Surrender. It’s over.”

“No!” Shang shouted.

Shang’s features seemed to age visibly. His masterful gaze dimmed to dull confusion. But he did not hesitate. He snapped forward out of his crouch with a flying sidekick aimed at Liu’s head. Liu ducked and rolled beneath the kick. Shang sailed above him, to land on the very edge of the arena.

He turned, spinning on the balls of his feet. But even as he did so, he overbalanced, toppling backward into the pit. He put out a foot to stop his fall, but no solid stone was there.

“Shadow warriors! I call on you!” Shang cried, and then he was gone, falling down, far down, to the spiked floor beneath. Liu turned his eyes away.

“Flawless victory,” Liu whispered. A waiting monk wrote down the words on his scroll.

With a sliding sound, stones moved in from the sides to cap the pit. Sonya, Kitana, and Johnny raced forward to take Liu in their arms.

The chorus of enslaved souls stilled for a moment, then burst forth again, crying in a babble of languages, “Free! Free! Free!”

The stone floor shook, and a pillar of light burst forth, breaking the rocks. Burning like a laser, the white beam shot straight up, through the ceiling of the chamber, breaking the stone roof apart and opening the interior of the Black Tower for the first time to the light of day.

The thick clouds of Outworld parted, revealing blue sky above, and a bright sun beating down.

“Free! Free! Free!” the chorus of voices sang. The pillar of light shot up hard and straight, like a column carved from purest marble, too dazzling to look upon. Sonya imagined that she could see armies of warriors, their faces transformed by joy, streaming up in the light, heading toward the open sky.

The sound of the voices was no longer a discord, but a vast harmony of joy and tranquility.

Liu turned away, dazzled by the beam. Another figure stood there. Once more he faced his brother, Chan.

“Brother. It’s really you,” Liu said in wonder and amazement.

“I knew you’d come,” Chan replied simply. He opened his arms and embraced Liu.

“I should never have left you,” Liu said, returning the embrace.

Chan held Liu back at arm’s length and shook his head.

“No force on earth could have prevented my death,” Chan said. “It was fated thus in my destiny. But you have given me back my soul. You fulfilled your oath. Now I can continue my journey.”

“We should have been together,” Liu said. Remorse mingled with the joy he felt.

“One day we will be reunited,” Chan promised. “Until then, remember, my spirit is always with you. Go in peace, my brother. Many more great adventures await you.”

Chan grew brighter and brighter, a dazzling shape, until he became too bright a light to look upon. Then his spirit elongated into a single beam and joined the pillar of light streaming upward from beneath the foundations of the Black Tower.

A tremor ran through the stones beneath the companions’ feet. The castle was crumbling around them. The walls fell into rubble as a fresh wind blew the ashes away. Here and there little sprigs of green appeared amid the cracked and broken rock. Only the fighting ring, with its dragon-head mosaic floor, was clear of rubble.

The dismal city was spread before them, the light of the morning sun sparkling down on it for the first time in eons. Here and there, small dark-clad figures crawled from out of the cracks to look in wonder at the undreamed-of blue of the sky.

Johnny looked down in wonder himself. Sonya was holding his hand.

Liu turned to his companions. “Let’s go home,” he said.

“A practical question,” Johnny said. “How do we go about doing that?”

“I can take you,” Princess Kitana said. “I have the power.”

The blue sky spun around them, and the wind sang in their ears. In a moment the companions were standing again beneath a blue sky, with a stone paving beneath a blue sky, with a stone paving beneath their feet, but they were no longer in Outworld. They stood on the plaza in front of the Temple of the Order of Light. A procession of red-robed monks, led by Grandfather, was starting across from the great gate of the temple toward them. A Special Forces major stood by Grandfather, an M16 in his hands.

“Well, let’s go,” Johnny said. Together they began to walk toward the temple.

“When will I see you again?” Liu asked Kitana beside him.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Kitana replied. She put her arm through Liu’s. “Will you return with me to Outworld, to try to put to rights the damage the emperor did?”

“Yes, I’ll come,” Liu replied. “Every man chooses his own path. That will be mine.”

“So will I ever see you again?” Johnny asked Sonya.

“Are you out of your mind?” Sonya said, but she didn’t drop her grip on Johnny’s hand.

Together they approached the temple. An old man, a coolie in a straw hat, stood before it. His arms were open in greeting, his eyes flashing an electric blue.

“Rayden!” Liu exclaimed.

“Who?” Jax asked.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” Rayden said. “What took you so long?”

“A couple of things came up,” Liu said. “But we took care of them.”

“Uh-oh,” Sonya whispered. She dropped Johnny’s hand and turned to Jax. “Look about three o’clock. In the crowd. What do you see?”

“Metal faceplate,” Jax said. “Kano.”

At the same moment that they spotted him, Kano saw Sonya and Jax. He started to back away. Sonya put out her hand, and Jax slapped his M16 into it.

“He’s yours,” Jax said. “I think you’ve earned him.”

“Okay, Kano,” Sonya shouted, “hold it right there. You’re still under arrest.”

The crime lord turned to flee. Sonya fired a quick burst, a line of shots stitching the flagstones in front of Kano’s feet.

“Freeze!”

Kano stopped and slowly raised his hands. Jax and Sonya walked over to where he stood.

“Come on,” Rayden said to the human fighters. “We have lots to do.”

“What do you mean ‘we’? I have a movie to shoot,” Johnny replied. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m under contract.”

“I’ve got a day job,” Sonya said, not looking up from where she was putting handcuffs on Kano.

“You’re going to let Liu Kang go back alone?” Rayden said. “I thought you were a team.”

“Oh God!” Sonya, Johnny and Liu said as one. Jax was too busy with his radio, calling in support, to pay any attention.

“Yes,” Rayden said. “Well, I suppose that I should be on my way as well.” He turned to leave, walking with his staff.

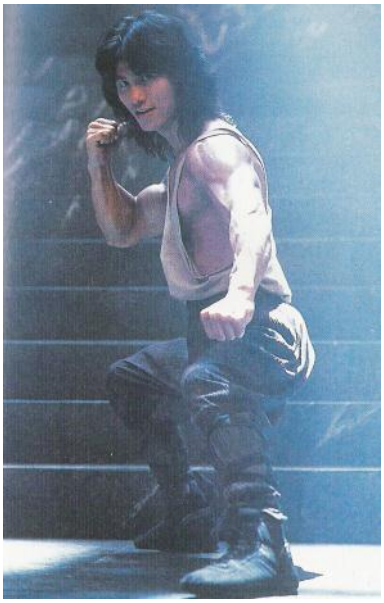
“I guess you knew it would end this way?” Liu said, hurrying to catch up.

“I didn’t have a clue,” Rayden responded. “You humans are so unpredictable.”

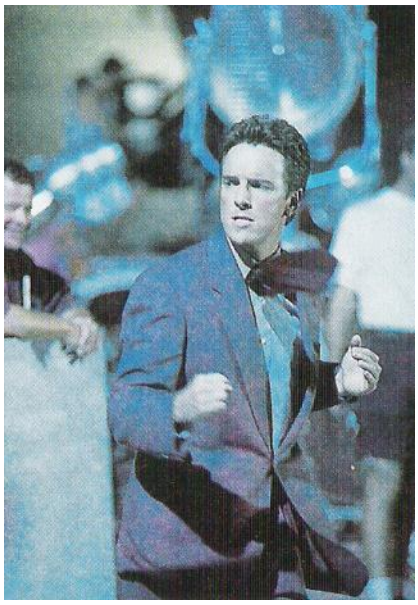
“I thought gods knew everything,” Liu said.

“You think this is the only world I have to worry about?” Rayden replied. With a flash of lightning and a boom of thunder he vanished.

Photos

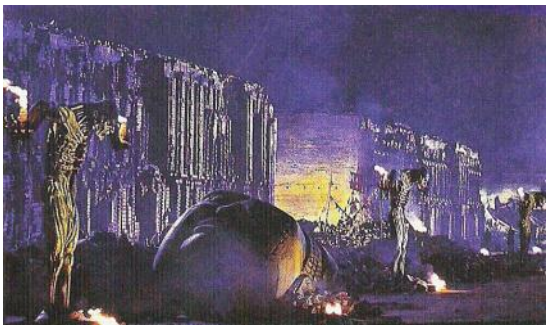


Liu Kang must face his destiny.



Movie star **Johnny Cage** has come to defend his honor...

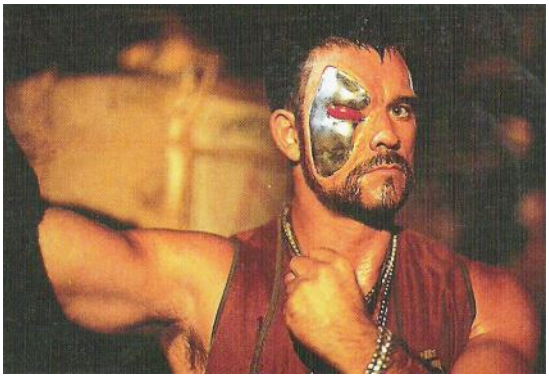
...but only the Thunder God **Rayden** understands the full importance of the tournament.



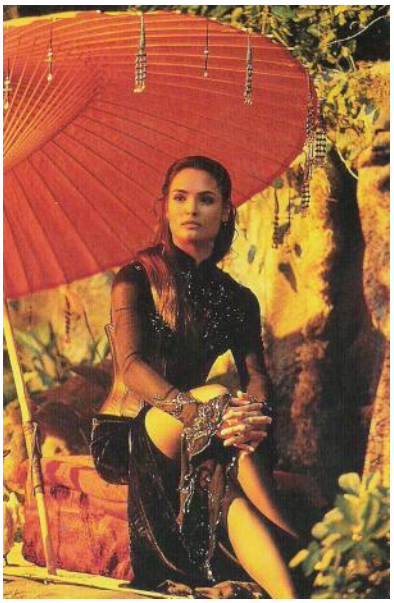
Behind the gates of **Outworld**...

...lurks the evil sorcerer **Shang Tsung.**

Sonya Blade demonstrates her skill...

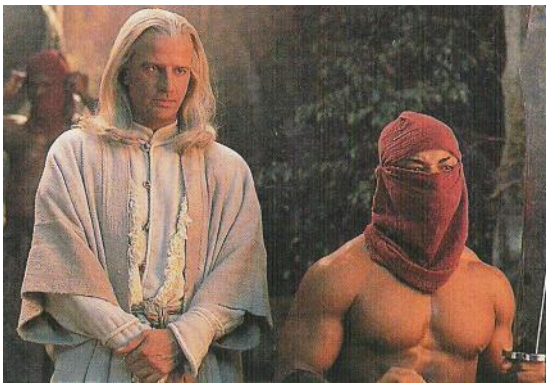


...but her true enemy is **Kano**.



Princess Kitana: Beautiful and mysterious.

Liu Kang battles **Sub-Zero**...



...while **Rayden** watched and waits.

Danger lurks in **Outworld**.

Goro, the reigning champion.

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